The Lost Cathedral

Being a Documentary Edition of Twenty-Eight Primary Sources Concerning the Construction of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, León, Nicaragua, with Antecedent Sources from the Colonial Period Beginning in 1527, as Edited and Annotated by Consuelo Vargas Montiel (1938–2024), Architect.

Instituto Superior de Estudios Iberoamericanos,

in association with the Archive of the Diocesan Chancery of León.

León, 1976.

Prepared for the web, at her behest, by M.A. Aybar · 2026.

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A Note on the Nature of This Work

The Lost Cathedral is a work of fiction. The Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in León, Nicaragua, exists; the documents that compose this edition do not. Consuelo Vargas Montiel is not a real person. The Instituto Superior de Estudios Iberoamericanos does not exist. No detail, letter, inventory, decree, or testimony reproduced here derives from a verifiable historical archive; all were written by the author named below. The names of persons, institutions, dates, and archival provenances are inventions, though some draw inspiration from real figures and practices of the colonial Central American period. Any resemblance to persons living or deceased is coincidental. This work is published under the literary convention of the found manuscript: the reader is invited to sustain the illusion while reading, and to remember, on closing the book, that it is entirely a fiction.

Text, edition, translations, and critical apparatus: **M.A. Aybar**.

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Digital edition prepared in Los Angeles, 2026, from the imaginary print edition of Managua, 1976.

For the women who gave me language: mothers, godmothers, grandmothers, aunts and cousins. Here their voice remains.

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Editor's Preface

On the morning of March 11, 1974, I was conducting a structural survey of the south transept of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in León, Nicaragua, when thermal imaging equipment indicated an anomaly in the wall between the second and third pilasters above the plinth — a void approximately sixteen centimeters deep and forty centimeters wide, inconsistent with the wall's documented construction. I probed it that same morning, with the tools I carried in my field kit. I found a sealed compartment, and inside it a cedar box wrapped in oilskin. Inside were six documents.

This edition is what four years of work have made of that discovery.

I should say at the outset what this edition is and what it is not. It is not a history of the Cathedral of León, though the documents it contains illuminate that history in ways that will require historians to revisit a number of established assumptions. It is not a biography of any of the individuals who appear in these documents, though several of those individuals are more vivid and more consequential than the existing literature suggests. It is a documentary edition — a collection of primary sources, transcribed, translated where necessary, and annotated with the care they deserve — accompanied by the editorial apparatus required to make them accessible to readers who are not specialists in colonial Central American history. The documents speak for themselves. My function is to ensure that they are heard.

I will describe what was found in the cedar box, and then I will describe what is not in this edition and why, and then I will explain how the edition is organized.

What Was Found

The cedar box contained six documents in varying states of preservation. All six were wrapped individually in oilskin of a quality consistent with eighteenth-century colonial production. The outer oilskin — the wrapping around the box itself — was of an older type, consistent with sixteenth-century production, which is among the more unusual features of a collection that has proven unusual throughout.

The six documents are:

The first is a private ledger, kept by a notary named Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche in the service of the Governor of Nicaragua between the years 1527 and 1531. Thirty-seven entries survive. The ledger is written in sixteenth-century Castilian, in a hand I have come to know as well as my own over the course of this work.

The second is a copy of a letter dictated by Pedro Arias Dávila, Governor of Nicaragua, to the same notary in March of 1531, and burned — at the governor's instruction — by the Bishop of Nicaragua on the evening of the same day. The copy was made by the notary. The letter concerns, among other things, the cathedral.

The third is an official inventory of the governor's personal effects, compiled by the same notary on the sixth day of March 1531, the date of the governor's death. This document contains a statement that the reader of the second document will find notable.

The fourth is the founding agreement of the Peru enterprise, dated 1524, bearing the signatures of Francisco Pizarro, Diego de Almagro, and a reference to Pedro Arias Dávila in the body of the text. I am not a lawyer and I will not characterize this document's legal standing. I will say that its physical presence in the cedar box, alongside the other documents, clarifies a great deal that was

previously unclear about the cathedral's construction history.

The fifth is a personal account written by an architect named Ignacio Moya in Seville, in 1771, describing his involvement in the cathedral project between 1748 and 1752. It is twenty-two pages. It is, in my assessment, the most important document in the collection, though I acknowledge that assessments of this kind are necessarily personal.

The sixth document is written on amate — bark paper — in Nahuatl. It is ten sentences long. It is three sentences long. I wrote ten and then corrected myself: it is three sentences long. I have left the correction visible. It is accurate in the way that corrections are accurate — it shows what I thought before I thought again.

Among the six documents in the cedar box, the one on bark paper is the one I return to.

What Is Not in This Edition

The documentary record of the Cathedral of León is extensive. The Diocesan Archive in León holds construction logs, correspondence, financial records, petitions, and administrative documents spanning the full period of the cathedral's construction from 1747 to 1814. The Archivo General de Indias in Seville holds the Council of the Indies' approval documentation and correspondence with the diocesan administration. The Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid holds supplementary records. I spent fourteen months working across these three archives, and the results of that research inform the annotation throughout this edition.

From this larger record, I have selected twenty-eight documents for inclusion. The selection criterion was simple: I included every document that, in

my judgment, bears directly on the central questions raised by the cedar box. I excluded administrative records that are either redundant with included documents or insufficiently illuminating to justify the space. The full archive catalogue, with my notes, is available to researchers at the Universidad Nacional.

There are three documents from the larger record whose inclusion I considered carefully. One I excluded; two I included with editorial caveats, as follows. The excluded document is a petition from the construction period regarding the labor status of certain workers, which I omitted because it raises questions I cannot answer and do not wish to appear to answer by selective inclusion. The two I included after extended hesitation are a letter from a Lima diocesan official dated 1763, which appears in abbreviated form as Document 21, and a deathbed confession recorded by a priest in 1771, which appears in full as Document 22. I mention all three because an editor who withholds — or who includes — without acknowledgment is not performing her function honestly. Nothing of significance has been withheld without my saying so here.

One further omission requires its own paragraph. The cedar box, when I opened it in 1974, contained six documents. Five of them are reproduced in this edition: Rodrigo's counter-ledger, the copy of the Governor's letter, the diocesan inventory, Ignacio Moya's account, and the Nahuatl document. The sixth — the founding agreement of the Peru enterprise dated 1524, bearing the signatures of Pizarro and Almagro and a reference in the body of the text to Pedro Arias Dávila — is not reproduced. I have withheld it on the advice of counsel. The agreement bears on legal questions that, in the judgment of the Universidad Nacional's legal office, are not yet fully extinguished, and the publication of the document's text in this edition would not serve the historical record so much as it would invite litigation that the historical record cannot resolve. The agreement

is described, in detail and from two distinct angles, in Documents 5 and 13; the reader who wishes to understand its content will find it accounted for there. The original is held in the Archivo Diocesano in León, where it may be consulted by qualified researchers under the Archive's standard conditions.

The Structure of This Edition

The twenty-eight documents are organized into four parts, each preceded by a brief contextual note.

Part One: The Governor's Notary contains seven documents from the period 1527 to 1546, centered on the notary Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche and his service to Pedro Arias Dávila. These documents predate the cathedral's construction by more than two centuries. The reason they are relevant will become clear.

Part Two: The Architect's Confession contains ten documents from the period 1610 to 1771, centered on the construction of the cathedral and the individuals directly involved in it. It includes Ignacio Moya's account, which is the structural center of the edition.

Part Three: The Wall contains nine documents from the period 1747 to 1790, focused on the construction of the south transept specifically, and on a mason referred to in the labor records as Tomasín. This section also contains the Nahuatl document, translated by Dr. Alejandro Reyes Domínguez of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, whose assistance I am grateful for and whose translation I have amended in one place, as noted.

Part Four: Whoever Builds contains two documents from the period 1974 to 1978 relating to my own research process: my research notes from the Archivo General de Indias, and correspondence with Dr. Alejandro Reyes

Domínguez of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

On Translation and Transcription

All documents originally in sixteenth-century Castilian have been transcribed into modern Spanish orthography and translated into English by me, with the exception of the Nahuatl document, for which the translation is Dr. Reyes Domínguez's with one amendment of my own. Legal formulae that resist direct translation are explained in the annotations. Latin phrases are translated in footnotes on first occurrence and thereafter assumed.

The documents contain a small number of scribal errors — words repeated, letters transposed, one instance of a phrase written and then crossed out. I have silently corrected errors that are clearly unintentional and noted all corrections that might be interpretively significant. Where a word is uncertain due to damage to the original, I have used brackets to indicate the uncertainty: [word?] means I am reasonably confident; [?] means I am not.

I have not standardized spelling or punctuation beyond what is necessary for readability. The documents were written by different people at different times in different registers of the same language, and the differences between them are part of what they say.

On the Documents Themselves

I have been asked, by colleagues who have read portions of this edition in draft, whether I find it strange to have spent four years in close company with people who have been dead for two to four centuries. I find the question itself strange: I am an architect. I spend my working life in close company with people who

have been dead for centuries, and what they left behind is what I study. The question is always the same question: what did they intend, and what did they build, and where do those two things differ, and why.

These documents answer that question with unusual directness. They are, in this respect, unlike most archival material. Most archival material tells you what institutions did and said. These documents tell you what people decided, and in several cases they tell you why — not the official why, but the actual why, the why that a person tells when they believe they are writing for no one, or for the distant future, or for God, which amounts to the same thing.

I will not tell the reader what to make of what they find here. It is not the editor's function to tell the reader what to make of things. My function is to ensure that the documents are legible, accurately presented, and placed in sufficient context to be understood. Everything beyond that is the reader's work.

I will say one thing, and then I will step aside.

The cathedral of León is, by objective architectural measurement, larger and more sophisticated than it had any administrative reason to be, given the size and resources of its diocese in the eighteenth century. Historians have noted this and attributed it variously to diocesan ambition, to the particular skill of the construction team, and to the enduring mystery of why some buildings exceed their circumstances while others merely fulfill them. These documents suggest a different explanation — not a simpler one, but a more complete one.

The building is what it is because a series of people, across two centuries, made decisions that were not recorded in the official documents, for reasons that were not available to the official record, in the service of intentions that the official record would not have recognized as legitimate. The building is their argument. It is still standing.

What the reader makes of that is the reader's business.

Consuelo Vargas Montiel Managua, Nicaragua January 1978

Part I

The Governor's Notary

These seven documents were found wrapped separately from the others — not in oilskin, which protected everything else in the cedar box, but in a cloth that a conservator at the Museo Nacional later told me was almost certainly silk damask, ecclesiastical, consistent with vestment production in the late sixteenth century. Someone had cut it along a former seam, carefully, and used it to wrap this bundle and nothing else. I do not know who did this, or when. The oilskin around the cedar box is, by fiber analysis, eighteenth century. The cloth is older. This means the documents in Part One were wrapped before they were placed inside the box — by someone, in the sixteenth or early seventeenth century, who had a piece of vestment cloth and used it to keep these particular papers separate from whatever else they were traveling with. A piece of cut vestment, in colonial Nicaragua, is not a neutral object. Someone made a choice about what this cloth was for. The documents predate the cathedral by more than two centuries. They were written by one man — Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, notary, in the city of León Viejo, the city under the ash, the city we know now only from excavation and careful measurement. He is the first voice in this collection. He wrote in a hand that is dense and slightly sideways, as if he were writing fast in insufficient light. He may have been. The light in León Viejo in 1527 was not what it is now.

Neither was the light in the Diocesan Archive in León in March of 1974, where I first read these documents at a table near a window that let in the late afternoon. You will decide, having read what he wrote, whether the vestment cloth was appropriate.

Letter of Appointment

Royal appointment · August 3, 1527

Document 1 of 28. Part One: The Governor's Notary. Opens the edition.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The document that begins this collection is the shortest document in it. It is also the most ordinary. I include it because every archive should begin with a credential — with the record of who was authorized to keep the record. Without this letter, Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche has no official standing. With it, everything he subsequently wrote is admissible.]*

BY ORDER OF HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR

Let it be known to all persons with business before the Provincial Administration of Nicaragua that:

On this third day of August in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred and twenty-seven, His Excellency Pedro Arias Dávila, Knight Commander of the Order of Santiago, Governor of the Province of Nicaragua, acting under his full authority as representative of the Crown of Castile in these territories, does hereby appoint one **Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche**, of Salamanca, trained notary of eleven years' standing, licensed by the Royal Notarial College of Castile under seal number 1147, to the position of **Notary to the Governor of Nicaragua**, effective immediately.

The said Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche shall hold the following responsibilities:

The faithful transcription of all official correspondence dictated by or addressed to the Governor of Nicaragua, and the maintenance of the official provincial archive in accordance with the Royal Statutes governing colonial administration.

The preparation and certification of all legal instruments, depositions, inventories, contracts, and official records as required by the Governor's office.

The keeping of such additional private records as the Governor may direct, under conditions of appropriate discretion.

The said Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche is hereby authorized to certify documents under his notarial seal in all matters pertaining to the Province of Nicaragua, and his certified copies shall be considered legally equivalent to originals in all proceedings before colonial courts and in correspondence with the offices of the Crown.

Compensation shall be as agreed by private instrument, a copy of which is held in the office of the provincial treasurer.

This appointment shall remain in force until revoked by the Governor or by the Governor's lawful successor in office.

Issued under the seal of the Governor of Nicaragua.

Pedro Arias Dávila Governor León, Nicaragua August 3, 1527

Witnessed by: Varela, Chief Clerk of the Provincial Administration

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[C.V.: The appointment was not revoked. Rodrigo served until the Governor's death on March 6, 1531, a period of three years and seven months. The appointment letter was filed in the provincial archive. The counter-ledger was not.]

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The counter-ledger is a private document — Rodrigo kept it separately from the provincial archive, in a bound folio he describes in his final letter to his daughter (Document 7) as "my other work." Thirty-seven entries survive, covering the period October 1527 to March 1531. The full transcription appears in Volume II of this edition. I have selected six entries here: three from the early period of his appointment, one from the middle period, and two from the final weeks.]*
>
> *The entries are brief by design. Rodrigo appears to have written them at night, after his official work was finished, in the hours when the day's documents had been sealed and the day's events had not yet become the next day's records. He was precise about the distinction.*
>
> *The counter-ledger is not a diary. He does not record his feelings. He records what happened, in the same language he used for everything else — which is to say legal language, the language he was trained in, the language in which he was most fluent. The reader will observe that this language was not designed for what he was sometimes required to record. He used it regardless.]*

Counter-Ledger Selections

Private ledger · 1527 – 1531

PRIVATE LEDGER

Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, Notary to the Governor of Nicaragua Kept apart from the archive. Not to be consulted without the keeper's direction.

Entry 1 — August 8, 1527

The position was explained to me by the chief clerk, a man named Varela, who holds his hands very still when he speaks, which I have noticed is often the sign of someone who has learned to control the parts of himself that would otherwise indicate feeling. He told me: the previous notary had been accurate. I noted that accuracy seemed an adequate qualification for the position. He agreed that it was generally adequate but that it had not, in the previous notary's case, proved sufficient. He did not elaborate. I did not require elaboration.

My primary function, Varela explained, is to copy the governor's private records into the official archive in language appropriate for Madrid. There is, he said, frequently a gap between what the governor's records contain and what the official archive should contain, and the notary's principal skill is managing this gap with care. He used the phrase "with care" twice. I understood the second use to be the significant one.

I have been a notary for eleven years. I am accustomed to the gap.

I met the governor at sunset. He did not rise. He looked at me for a long time without speaking, which I have since learned is his standard method of

assessment — he says that a man who can tolerate silence is either patient or frightened, and that either quality is useful. Then he said: "You have an indigenous mother." I said that I did — Nahua, from the north of the Mexico territory. He said: "Good. That means you understand two things at once. Most men don't." He did not say what two things. I assumed he would clarify in time.

I return to this entry now, at four years' distance. He has not clarified. I have been working for him for four years and I now understand that the clarification was the statement. He meant that I already knew what he meant, and he was telling me that he knew I knew. It was the most efficient possible introduction to how the man thinks.

I begin to understand why the previous notary was insufficient.

Entry 4 — November 19, 1527

Today I attended a Requiem Mass for Pedro Arias Dávila, Governor of Nicaragua. The subject of the Mass was present. He sat in a carved chair placed to the left of the altar, slightly forward of the choir stalls, and he listened to his own funeral rite performed in full by Fray Hermano Celestino, who is eighty years old and did not appear to find the arrangement unusual.

The coffin was present. It is plain wood, iron handles, no inscription. It travels with the governor. I had been told this before today and I had understood it as a figure of speech. It is not a figure of speech.

The Mass took one hour and twenty minutes. The Dies Irae was sung by a choir of six, two of whom were children, and it was as well-performed as any I have heard, which struck me as an odd thing to notice about a Requiem for a living man. The governor's eyes were open throughout. He did not move, except once, near the end of the Agnus Dei, when he turned his head and looked at the

window for a considerable time.

I do not know what he saw.

At the conclusion of the Mass, Fray Celestino blessed him, and the governor nodded, and the choir processed out, and then it was the two of them in the empty church and I in the back row, which is where I had been instructed to sit, with my ledger.

The governor said, without turning to look at me: "Write down that it was conducted with appropriate solemnity."

I wrote this down.

He said: "Write down that the deceased was at peace."

I wrote this down.

He said: "Everything else you can omit."

I closed the ledger.

I am recording this now because a notary is a guardian of what occurred. What occurred was a man attending the annual Mass for his own soul. He appeared, to my observation, at peace. This is accurate. I record it without comment because no comment I am capable of making would be adequate to the observation.

Entry 8 — March 15, 1528

The official document recording the sentencing of one Hernán Quijano, a cattle-lease holder operating under the governor's charter, reads as follows: *that the said Hernán Quijano did, having been found in breach of the conditions of his charter as recorded in the provincial archive under seal dated September 1526, voluntarily surrender his claim and depart the province within thirty days; and*

that this matter is resolved to the satisfaction of all parties, this fifteenth day of March, 1528, in the city of León.

This is the document I prepared. It contains no errors of transcription. I copied it from the governor's dictated record. The word "voluntarily" appears in the governor's dictated record. I copied it faithfully.

What I observed was the following.

Hernán Quijano is a man of forty-two years, good health, three children, a house in the north quarter of the city, and a lease arrangement that was, by any reading of the charter I am capable of making, within its stated terms. He came to the governor's chamber at the governor's invitation, which is to say at the governor's instruction, which is to say he had no practical alternative to attending. He sat in the chair opposite the governor's desk. The governor read from the charter document. The governor explained what he understood the charter to mean. The governor explained what would happen if the charter were found, upon further review, to be in violation of the provincial land statutes. The governor's explanation took approximately fifteen minutes. At the conclusion of the explanation, Hernán Quijano said that he would be happy to surrender his claim, and thanked the governor for the clarity, and left.

He was not, during this explanation, touched. No violence occurred in the room. No threat was stated explicitly. The word "voluntarily" is accurate in the narrow sense.

I have been a notary for eleven years. I know the narrow sense.

I note this in my private ledger and nowhere else. The official document is correct. The governor dictated it. I copied it faithfully. These are the facts of my involvement.

I am writing this down because the record requires it. Whether the record is

adequate to what occurred is not for the ledger to settle.

Entry 14 — August 7, 1529

The governor called me to his chamber to review the inventory of his private papers. This is a routine matter — he reviews the inventory twice yearly and I am required to witness the review and certify its accuracy. I have performed this review twice before. The inventory is consistent with previous versions, with one addition.

The addition is a cedar box, iron-clasped, approximately forty centimeters in length, stored at the bottom of the chest beneath the east window. The chest is locked; I hold the key, which is my standard arrangement with all private materials in my care. The cedar box has its own lock. I do not hold the key to the cedar box.

I noted the box on the inventory as: *One cedar box, iron clasp, contents unspecified, value unknown. Present and accounted for.*

The governor watched me write this. Then he said: "There will come a time when the Bishop asks you for the key to the chest."

I asked which Bishop. He said: "The current one, or whoever is current when the time comes. Give him the reason he gives you, and let him have the key. He will know what he is looking for."

I asked whether the Bishop would also need a key to the cedar box itself. The governor looked at me for a moment with what I can only describe as assessment, and then he said: "No. The cedar box will not need to be opened."

I have recorded this conversation exactly as it occurred. I do not know what the cedar box contains. I have my suspicions based on what the governor told

Varela about his history with the Peru expedition, which Varela told me in confidence last spring. If my suspicions are correct, the cedar box contains a document of considerable legal weight, which means it contains a debt, which means it is the most valuable thing in the provincial archive. It is stored at the bottom of a chest in a room that leaks when it rains from the northeast, which it does for six weeks every year.

I have reviewed the condition of the oilskin wrapping. It is adequate.

Entry 31 — March 1, 1531

This afternoon I was summoned to the governor's private chamber and I took dictation of a letter addressed to the Bishop of Nicaragua. The letter concerned, among other things, the cedar box. It contained a philosophical statement about the nature of records. It ended with an instruction about the cathedral.

The letter took forty-five minutes to dictate. The governor dictated without pause or hesitation, as a man reads from a memorized text. He paused once, near the end, and looked at the window for a considerable time. I have seen him do this before. I waited. He resumed.

At the conclusion of the dictation he said: "Seal it and take it to the Bishop this afternoon. Tell the Bishop I wish it burned after he has read it."

I sealed the letter. I delivered it. This evening, by the Bishop's invitation, I observed the burning: a clay dish, the letter in full, the ash scattered in the garden outside the Bishop's study window. The burning took approximately four minutes. I do not know exactly, as I was not watching the clock. I was watching the paper.

I have returned to my room. It is now late, past the second bell, and I have not slept. I am sitting at my desk with the counter-ledger open and the fire low

and a copy of the letter in front of me that I transcribed from memory immediately upon returning from the Bishop's garden.

I should explain why I made the copy.

I made the copy because I am a notary and the letter contained a real arrangement with real consequences for this province, and the Bishop's fire does not change what was arranged. I made it because the governor gave me the key to the cedar box and told me the Bishop would ask for it and did not ask me what I thought about this, which is the closest he has ever come to trusting me with his actual intentions. I made it because he dictated the letter in this room, to me, alone, when he could have used any other means of communication available to him, and I believe — I am not certain, but I believe — that he was aware of what I would do.

He chose me because I have an indigenous mother. Because I understand two things at once.

I understand this: the letter was burned. I understand this: the copy exists.

I do not know if this is courage. I have been sitting here for two hours trying to determine whether what I feel is courage or its absence, and I cannot distinguish them. They may be the same thing in different light.

I am going to try to sleep. Tomorrow the governor will be ninety-one years old. He has not asked me to arrange any celebration.

Final Entry — March 6, 1531

Pedro Arias Dávila, Governor of the Province of Nicaragua, died this morning between the second and third bells, in his chamber, of causes consistent with his age. I was notified by Varela at sunrise. I proceeded to the chamber. The body

had already been arranged.

My tasks for the day:

I compiled the official inventory of the governor's personal effects, as required by the provincial statutes governing the deaths of officers of the Crown. The inventory is filed in the provincial archive and certified under my seal. It is complete and accurate.

I retrieved the cedar box from the chest beneath the east window and delivered it to the Bishop's residence at midday, as I had been instructed, in response to a reason the Bishop gave me which I considered sufficient. The cedar box was signed for by the Bishop's secretary. I have the receipt.

I returned to my room and opened the counter-ledger.

I have been trying for some time to think of what to record here, and I find I have nothing to add to the record I have been keeping for four years. The governor is dead. The documents are where they should be. The copy of the letter is where I put it. The cedar box is with the Bishop.

Varela told me this afternoon that the position will be advertised and that my services are appreciated and that there will be a suitable arrangement made for my transition. He held his hands very still when he said this.

I thanked him.

I want to record one thing, for the archive that is only mine and that I do not expect anyone to read for a very long time, if ever.

He did not ask me not to make the copy. He dictated the letter slowly, with pauses I did not need. He told me the Bishop would burn it. He knew I had been keeping this ledger for four years — I have seen him look at it, never asked about it, never instructed me to stop. He gave me the key to the chest and told me to wait for the Bishop's reason.

He constructed this. He did not tell me he was constructing it because he knew he didn't have to.

I do not know how to record what I feel about this. I am not certain that recording it is my function. My function is to certify what occurred, and what I can certify is this: a man spent ninety-one years building things he would not live to see, and at the end he built one more thing, and I was the material.

I do not think he was wrong about me.

R.C. de la Noche León, Nicaragua March 6, 1531

Deposition and Counter-Ledger Entry 14

Official deposition + ledger entry · August 7, 1529

Document 3 of 28. Part One: The Governor's Notary. Follows the counter-ledger selections (Document 2) and precedes Counter-Ledger Entry 31 (Document 4).

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: Document 3 is two documents presented together: the official certification of the Governor's biannual private-papers review, conducted in August 1529, and Counter-Ledger Entry 14, written by Rodrigo on the same day. The official document is five sentences. The private entry is four paragraphs. The deposition records what was found. The ledger entry records what he decided to do about it. Between them, the cedar box.]*

Part A — Official Certification

CERTIFICATION OF PRIVATE PAPERS REVIEW

In accordance with the provisions of the Royal Statutes governing the administration of colonial provinces, which require a biannual review and certification of all papers held by the Governor outside the official provincial archive, the following certification is made:

On this seventh day of August in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred and twenty-nine, I, Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, Notary to the Governor of Nicaragua, did attend His Excellency the Governor in his private chamber and did review, in his presence, the contents of the chest maintained by

the Governor for private papers, and do hereby certify that the contents of said chest are consistent with the previous certification of February 1529, with the addition of one item, described as follows: one cedar box, iron-clasped, wrapped in oilskin, contents not examined, value not assessable.

The Governor's private papers are in order.

Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, Notary León, Nicaragua August 7, 1529

[Seal]

Part B — Counter-Ledger Entry 14

August 7, 1529

[As reproduced in Document 2 of this edition. The cedar-box passage, reproduced here for its position in the reading order.]

I noted the box on the inventory as: *One cedar box, iron clasp, contents unspecified, value unknown. Present and accounted for.*

The governor watched me write this. Then he said: "There will come a time when the Bishop asks you for the key to the chest."

I asked which Bishop. He said: "The current one, or whoever is current when the time comes. Give him the reason he gives you, and let him have the key. He will know what he is looking for."

I asked whether the Bishop would also need a key to the cedar box itself. The governor looked at me for a moment with what I can only describe as assessment, and then he said: "No. The cedar box will not need to be opened."

I have reviewed the condition of the oilskin wrapping. It is adequate.

[C.V.: The official certification records the cedar box as "contents not examined." This is accurate. Rodrigo did not examine the contents. He did not need to. The counter-ledger makes clear he had already formed a precise hypothesis about what the box contained, based on a conversation he had with the chief clerk the previous spring — a conversation that does not appear in any official document. The official certification is five sentences. The private entry is four paragraphs. Between them, the cedar box.]

Counter-Ledger Entry 31

Private ledger entry · March 1, 1531

Document 4 of 28. Part One: The Governor's Notary. Immediately precedes The Letter (Document 5).

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The reader has just read Entry 31 in Document 2. It belongs here, in the reading order, immediately before the letter. Entry 31 was written on the same night, after the letter was burned and after Rodrigo had made the copy from memory. He wrote the copy first. Then he sat down with the counter-ledger and wrote Entry 31, reflecting on what he had just done. I know this because the entry is on fresher ink — he refilled his pen between the two. The copy of the letter is the last thing Rodrigo wrote that was about the letter; Entry 31 is the first thing he wrote afterward that was not.]*

THE LOST CATHEDRAL

The Letter

Dictated letter (copy) · March 1, 1531

Preamble — In Rodrigo's Hand

Copy of a letter dictated by His Excellency Pedro Arias Dávila, Governor of the Province of Nicaragua, to his notary Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, and addressed to the Most Reverend Fray Diego de Salamanca, Bishop of Nicaragua. Dictated in the governor's private chamber on this first day of March, in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred and thirty-one. No other person was present. The governor did not read the letter back after dictation. He said: "It is correct." He had not heard it read back.

The Letter

YOUR REVEREND EXCELLENCY,

I write to you from a bed in which I have not slept and from a province which will not be governed by me much longer. You will observe that I state this plainly and without ceremony. A man who has carried his own coffin for eighteen years has had sufficient time to accustom himself to departure, and I find that I have no patience left for the forms of approach which I have observed in correspondence for seven decades. We are, between us, too old for that. You are sixty-three. I am ninety. We have both lived long enough to say what we mean.

I have a matter of business to conclude.

Among my personal effects — specifically among those papers I have kept

separate from the provincial archive and under my own lock and key since the year 1526 — there is a document. You will find it in a cedar box, wrapped in oilskin, at the bottom of the chest beneath the east window in my chamber. The chest is locked. My notary Rodrigo has the key, along with instructions not to surrender it without a reason he considers sufficient. Give him a reason. He is a loyal man in the ways that matter. He reads everything he copies, which is why I employed him, and he will have formed his own conclusions about this letter by the time it reaches you. His conclusions are probably correct.

The document in the cedar box bears the signatures of Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro, dated in the seventh year of the reign of our sovereign Charles, which is to say 1524. It records my standing as a founding party to the enterprise that would become, in the years following my withdrawal from it, the conquest of Peru. You will know this history in its broad outlines. What you will not know, because I have told no one, is what I kept.

Pizarro and Almagro were thorough men in most respects. They were not thorough about paperwork. The original agreement was never formally dissolved — not because anyone forgot, but because men who are about to be very rich find it inconvenient to spend an afternoon attending to the administrative wishes of the man they are leaving behind. I withdrew. I received my compensation. I allowed them to proceed to their glory. What I did not allow was the return of my copy of the agreement, and since they were disinclined to ask for it directly, and I was disinclined to offer it, the document has remained in the cedar box for five years, accumulating nothing except the mustiness of oilskin in a rainy climate, and the considerable interest of a debt unpaid.

Documents do not dissolve. This is their only quality I have ever admired. A man dissolves. An agreement dissolves. A memory dissolves the moment the mind holding it stops. But a document — a document with signatures on it, in

the right language, witnessed and dated — this persists. It persists regardless of whether anyone wishes it to. It persists regardless of whether anyone reads it, or knows it exists, or would prefer it did not. There is something almost theological about this, which I mention because you are a Bishop and it is your business to have considered it.

What the document means legally is a matter I commend to scholars with more leisure than I possess. What it means practically is this: it is a debt. It is a debt of an empire to a province. The empire does not acknowledge this debt. The empire is, in the manner of empires, accustomed to acknowledging only what it finds convenient. But the empire builds things. It builds churches, garrisons, roads, harbors, and eventually — when it wishes to demonstrate that a place merits governing, that the money spent on conquest was not wasted, that God looks favorably on the investment — it builds cathedrals.

This province will have a cathedral. Not the lean, provisional church you are currently obliged to conduct your offices in, the one that admits the rain in October and requires three candles where one should be sufficient. A real cathedral. A building that will still be standing when everyone alive in this city today is beneath the ground. I do not know when it will come. It may come in your time, though I doubt it. It may come in the time of your successor, or his successor, or some Bishop whose name neither of us would recognize. But it will come. Empires always build. It is their compulsion and their vanity and, if I am being fair to them, one of the few things they do that outlasts their reasons for doing it.

When it comes, you will present the document to whoever holds the commission. You will say that the founding Governor of this province had a prior claim in the matter of Peru — and that here is the evidence of the claim — and that the claim has never been settled — and that León must have the grander

building. You will say nothing about its legal standing. You will allow them to form their own assessment. In my experience, men confronted with a signed document from two decades prior will argue the legal standing for a considerable time before doing anything practical, and while they argue the walls will go up, and thirty feet of stone settles most arguments.

I am aware that you may have reservations about this arrangement. I invite you to examine them. The reservation that concerns me most is the one about irregularity — the sense that an arrangement of this nature, conducted between a dying governor and an incumbent bishop without the knowledge of the relevant councils and offices in Madrid, may not be entirely within the bounds of proper procedure. I will say two things in response to this. First: I have been operating outside proper procedure since 1514 and I remain confident that proper procedure has yet to produce anything worth remembering. Second: the alternative is that Peru, which I made possible by funding the expedition that discovered it, builds a cathedral of the first rank while Nicaragua receives whatever is left over from the calculations of men who have never set foot in this province and are not required to live in it.

I am ninety years old. I have killed men for less cause than this, and I have been decorated for it by the same Crown whose procedures concern you. I am asking you only to hold a document.

The Bishop who occupies your position when the time arrives will know what to do with it, because you will ensure that this knowledge passes. I do not require a formal mechanism for this. A story, told to your successor in private, with the cedar box changing hands. This is how things have always passed between institutions when the institutions wish to avoid documentation. You are a Bishop. You know how this is done.

I will tell you one further thing, which I tell you because it will be burned

with this letter and will therefore cost me nothing.

I do not believe in the world that follows this one. I have considered the question carefully — more carefully, perhaps, than most men, because I have been aware of its practical significance since the morning in 1513 when I woke inside a coffin and found that the servants had not waited as long as they should have before proceeding with the arrangements. I have had eighteen years to reconsider the question, and my conclusion remains the same. The next world is a structure built by powerful institutions for the management of men who would otherwise make unreasonable demands of this one. It is efficiently designed. I have no quarrel with it. I have simply never found it personally applicable.

What I believe in is this world. I believe that what a man makes in it is everything he will ever have, and that men who understand this make more than men who do not, because they are not reserving their efforts for somewhere else.

I have made more than most. I have made Panama. I have made Nicaragua. I have made the legal record of this province for four years running, which is in some respects a more permanent achievement than either of the others, since the legal record is the only thing that tells subsequent centuries what actually happened, and I have been careful about what it says. I have made the conditions under which Peru was possible, which is a contribution that Peru's chroniclers will take considerable pains not to credit me for, and which I note here with the appropriate satisfaction, in a document that will be burned.

The cathedral is the last thing I will make. I will not see it. I will not hear it. By every form of reasoning available to me, I will have no awareness that it exists at all. And yet I find that I care about it considerably. I have been thinking about why this is. I have concluded that it is this: a building is the one argument that continues without its maker. A man argues and is answered, and then dies, and the argument stops. A building continues to argue after the man is gone. It

does not require him. It does not require that anyone remember him. It simply stands there, forty feet of dressed stone, and makes the point.

I want this point made.

Build it big. Build it on ground that does not move — this ground moves, you know it as well as I do, Momotombo sees to that, and whatever is built here must be built knowing that it will be tested. Build it with good stone, well-cut, and with mathematics that will outlast the men who calculated them. Do not trust the men who tell you what you have is adequate. They are not the ones who will stand inside it when it shakes. Build it to resist. Build it so that when everything around it falls — and things fall, here, everything falls — the cathedral stands.

And build it so that when people stand inside it two hundred years from now, they will feel something they cannot name. I have felt this in buildings. You have felt it. It is not God — or it is not only God — it is the weight of a man's will compressed into stone and mortar and made to persist. That feeling, in the cathedral of León, will be mine. I do not require anyone to know this. I require only that it be true.

This is my theology. You may retain yours. I have no objection to yours. You have served it faithfully and it has served you adequately in return, which is the best one can say of most arrangements. But build my cathedral first. Build it first and build it large, and let the argument continue without me.

I remain, as I have always remained, in service to what I have built and to nothing else.

Pedro Arias Dávila Governor of the Province of Nicaragua First day of March, 1531 In the city of León

Rodrigo's Appended Paragraph — In a Different Hand, Same Date

The foregoing is a true and complete copy of the letter dictated to me on the date shown above, and delivered by me to His Excellency the Bishop on the afternoon of the same date, in the condition specified — sealed, no address — and burned by His Excellency in my presence on the evening of the same date, at approximately the hour of vespers, in a clay dish, which was then taken outside and the ash scattered in the garden. I witnessed all of this. I made no comment.

I have transcribed this copy because a notary is a guardian of what occurred. What the governor dictated occurred. The Bishop's fire does not change what occurred. A document destroyed is still a document. It simply becomes a document that requires a notary to have been paying attention.

I am aware of the risk attached to this copy. I am aware that if it were found by the wrong persons I would lose my position, my family's security, and perhaps more than that, since the contents concern the Council of the Indies and the Bishop in unflattering proximity. I am also aware that I have read this letter in full — twice, while transcribing it; once afterward, to be certain I had copied it correctly — and that it contains an arrangement which will, if honored, affect this province for generations, and that I appear to be the only person outside the Bishop's confidence who knows of its existence.

I did not seek this position. It found me by way of my employment, and by way of the fact that the governor chose, as he did everything, to have one person present and to select that person carefully. I do not believe he was unaware that I would copy it. I believe he was indifferent. He gave me the key to the cedar box. He told me the Bishop would ask for it. He did not tell me not to read the document inside.

I do not know if this copy is courage. The record required it. Whether what I have done is sufficient is not for me to settle. It is what I have.

Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, notary León, Nicaragua Sixth day of March, 1531

[C.V.: The date of Rodrigo's paragraph is March 6 — five days after the letter was dictated. This is the date of Pedrarias's death. The inventory of the governor's effects — Document 6 of this collection — is also dated March 6. Rodrigo compiled the inventory and transcribed this copy on the same day, in the same hours. I do not know in which order he did these things. I do not think the order matters. What matters is that he did both.]

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: Document 6 requires no introduction.]*

The Inventory

Official inventory · March 6, 1531

OFFICIAL INVENTORY

By authority of the Crown of Castile, in the name of His Imperial Majesty Charles, King of Castile, León, Aragon, and the Two Sicilies, Holy Roman Emperor:

Inventory of the personal effects of His Excellency Pedro Arias Dávila, Knight Commander of the Order of Santiago, Governor of the Province of Nicaragua, deceased this sixth day of March in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred and thirty-one, in the city of León, in his sixty-seventh year of service to the Crown.

Compiled in accordance with the Royal Statutes governing the estates of officers of the Crown dying in service in the American territories, specifically the Ordinance of Burgos as amended by the supplementary provisions of 1523. Compiled by Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, Notary to the Governor, acting in his official capacity. The inventory is complete to the best of the notary's knowledge and belief. It is certified under the notary's seal at the conclusion of this document.

PART I — FURNISHINGS AND PERSONAL EFFECTS OF THE GOVERNOR'S CHAMBER

One carved chair, oak, high-backed, with arms, in serviceable condition, with a cushion of red wool, worn. Estimated value: eight maravedís.

One writing desk, cedar, three drawers, iron fittings, one drawer with a false bottom, empty. The false bottom contained no documents at the time of inventory. Estimated value: twelve maravedís.

One chest, pine, iron lock and handles, contents inventoried separately in Part III below. Estimated value: five maravedís.

One bed, frame of tropical hardwood, rope stringing, mattress of cotton stuffing, in poor condition at the seams. Two wool blankets, one in serviceable condition, one not. One pillow, feather-stuffed, in adequate condition. Estimated value for the ensemble: nine maravedís.

One writing stand, portable, iron-jointed, of the field variety, capable of being collapsed for travel. Three ceramic inkwells, two of which retain usable ink. One bundle of quill pens, some used, some not, bundled with twine. Estimated value: six maravedís.

Seven wax candles, white, unused. Four wax candles, partially used, of varying lengths. Value: negligible.

One wooden cross, plain pine, no inscription, no ornamentation, hung above the bed by a single iron nail. Value: negligible.

One prayer book, bound in brown leather, heavily worn at the spine, with marginalia throughout in two different hands, neither of which this notary can identify with certainty as the governor's. The prayer book is not listed separately in the private catalogue. Value: not assessable.

One coffin, plain wood — pine, this notary believes, though the quality of construction is better than common pine suggests — with iron handles, four, and no inscription of any kind. Present in the chamber at the time of the governor's death, positioned against the west wall beside the door. Having made inquiry of the household staff, I am advised that the coffin was the personal property of the

deceased and had been in his continuous possession since the year 1513, a period of eighteen years, and that it accompanied him in all his subsequent travels and official residences, including during his tenure as Governor-General of Castilla del Oro and his removal thence to this province. I have included it in this inventory as personal property on the grounds that it plainly was personal property, whatever else it was. Estimated value: not assessable.

PART II — CLOTHING AND REGALIA

One governor's chain of office, silver, twelve links, with a medallion bearing the royal arms, in good condition. This item is the property of the Crown and is to be returned to the viceregal office in Mexico City. It is listed here for completeness only.

One dress sword, Toledo steel, silver hilt with a small emerald set in the pommel, scabbard of worked leather with silver fittings, in excellent condition. Estimated value: forty maravedís.

One ordinary sword, Toledo steel, plain iron hilt, scabbard of plain leather, in serviceable condition. Estimated value: fifteen maravedís.

One military coat, wool, dark, with the insignia of the Order of Santiago at the breast, in serviceable condition. Two pairs of boots, leather, one in good condition, one worn through at the left sole. One hat, broad-brimmed, black felt, with a band of dark ribbon, in serviceable condition. Two linen shirts, one wool shirt, two pairs of hose. Various undergarments, not itemized.

Three small items of personal jewelry: one ring, silver, no stone, a plain band of the kind worn in mourning; one ring, gold, with a signet that I cannot read clearly enough to describe; one medal of Santiago, small, worn on a chain, which the staff report he wore at all times and which was found on his person

this morning.

PART III — PAPERS AND DOCUMENTS

The governor maintained his personal papers separately from the provincial archive, in the chest described in Part I. The chest was locked; I hold the key in my official capacity. I opened the chest this morning and inventoried the contents as follows.

Provincial archive materials: Four folders of correspondence pertaining to provincial administration, copies of documents filed in the archive. These are official records and are transferred to the archive intact.

Private correspondence: Eleven letters from various persons, covering the period 1524–1530. I have read the letters as required by the inventory procedure. None of them bear directly on provincial matters or require retention in the official archive. I have set them aside for disposition at the discretion of the provincial administrator.

One cedar box, iron-clasped, wrapped in oilskin, stored beneath the above materials. I have inventoried this box separately. Its contents are not described here. The box was delivered to the residence of the Bishop of Nicaragua this afternoon, at midday, in accordance with instructions I received from the governor prior to his death and in response to a reason given by the Bishop which I found sufficient. A signed receipt from the Bishop's secretary is attached to this inventory as Appendix A.

One letter, dictated by the deceased to this notary on the first day of March of this year, four days before his death, sealed by this notary and delivered to His Excellency the Bishop of Nicaragua on the afternoon of the same day. The letter was burned by the Bishop in the presence of this notary on the evening of

March 1, at approximately the hour of vespers, in a clay dish, the ash of which was scattered in the garden of the Bishop's residence. The burning was conducted at the express direction of the deceased, as communicated to this notary at the time of dictation. This notary made no copy. The contents of the letter are accordingly not known to the official record of this province.

[C.V.: The reader has already read the copy.]

CERTIFICATION

I, Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, Notary to the Governor of the Province of Nicaragua, do hereby certify under my official seal that the foregoing inventory is complete and accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief, compiled on this sixth day of March in the Year of Our Lord one thousand five hundred and thirty-one, in the city of León, in the Province of Nicaragua, in the reign of His Imperial Majesty Charles.

May God keep the soul of Pedro Arias Dávila.

Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche Notary León, Nicaragua March 6, 1531

[Seal]

Appendix A — Receipt for the cedar box — is not reproduced in this edition. It exists in the Diocesan Archive of León, Nicaragua, in the same bundle as the diocesan inventory of 1647 (Document 9). It is a receipt for one box, cedar, iron-clasped, wrapped in oilskin, received from Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche on the sixth day of March, 1531. The contents are described as: unspecified. The recipient is described as: the office of the Bishop of Nicaragua.

[C.V.: I have chosen not to reproduce the receipt. It adds nothing except the

confirmation that a receipt exists. I include this note only because the absence of a document, in an edition of this nature, should always be a deliberate editorial choice and not an oversight. The receipt is an oversight on no one's part. It is simply not interesting. The cedar box is interesting.]

Rodrigo's Letter to Catalina

Personal letter · 1546

Document 7 of 28. Part One: The Governor's Notary. Closes Part One.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: This letter was not in the cedar box. It was found in the Diocesan Archive of León in a bundle of miscellaneous correspondence from the mid-sixteenth century, misfiled between a land survey from 1543 and a cathedral maintenance record from 1551. It is addressed to "my daughter Catalina, in Salamanca, if this reaches her." It appears never to have been sent. I do not know when Rodrigo wrote it — the date is absent — but the handwriting is older than the counter-ledger entries, more effortful, and the paper is different. I place it after the inventory because it reads like an afterward.]*

My dear Catalina,

I do not know if you are alive. I have not received a letter from Salamanca in four years, which may mean that the letters are not arriving, or may mean that you have stopped writing them, or may mean something I prefer not to put into words on a page that must travel six thousand miles to reach you. If you are alive, please write. If you are not, then this letter will find no one, which is the kind of thing correspondence in this province has come to be.

I am writing to tell you several things, some of which I should have told you before I left and did not, because you were twelve years old and I was afraid.

The first thing is that I am well. I am sixty-two, which is older than I

expected to reach when I came here, and I have been in reasonable health since the illness of three years ago which I described to you at the time as "a passing difficulty" and which was in fact considerably more serious than that. I am sorry for the understatement. I have made a habit of understatement, which you may remember from your childhood, and which I have been trying to correct in recent years.

The second thing is about the work I did for the governor, which I described to you in my letters at the time as "notarial service" and which was, in fact, considerably more complicated than that.

I served a man named Pedro Arias Dávila for three years and five months, from October 1527 until his death in March of 1531. He is recorded in the histories as a founding figure of this province, which is accurate. He is recorded as a man of considerable administrative accomplishment, which is also accurate. What the histories do not record — because the histories rely on official documents and I made very certain that the official documents said exactly what they were supposed to say — is what it was like to be in his presence.

I am going to try to describe it now, not for the histories, but for you.

He was ninety-one years old when he died. I met him when he was eighty-seven. He had been declared dead once, in 1513, and had woken inside his own coffin during the funeral preparations, and had carried that coffin with him everywhere he went for the next eighteen years. He attended a Requiem Mass for his own soul every November. He dictated a letter, in March of 1531, that contained a real and significant arrangement concerning the future of this city, and he dictated it to me, alone, and then told me to deliver it to the Bishop and have it burned. And then he looked at me with the expression of a man who has just said exactly what he intended to say and knows it will be understood correctly.

I made a copy. I kept the copy. I have kept it for fourteen years.

I am not going to explain why I made the copy, because I have tried to explain it in other places and I am not sure the explanation is the honest part. The honest part is: I made it because I could not not make it. A notary is a guardian of what occurred, and what was dictated occurred, and I am not capable of looking at a thing that occurred and pretending that it did not. This is a quality of character that I do not know whether to count as a virtue. It has cost me sleep, and whatever peace of mind I might otherwise have found in this work. It has not cost me more than that, but only because I have been careful.

The copy is hidden. It has been hidden since 1531. It will remain hidden for as long as I am alive and possibly for some time after. I am telling you this not because I want you to find it — I do not, the finding is not your responsibility, the finding will happen in its own time or not at all — but because I want someone who knew me to know that I did a thing that I believe was right, and that I did it alone, and that I was afraid, and that I did it anyway. You are the only person in the world I trust to hold this information correctly.

The arrangement in the letter concerns the Cathedral of León — a cathedral that does not yet exist, that may not exist for many years, that will be built, eventually, by people none of us know yet, in a city that is not yet entirely sure it deserves one. The governor believed it would be built. He was very confident about this. He was right about most things, and I have found, in the years since his death, that the things he was wrong about were usually things he didn't care about, which gave him an excellent predictive record on the things that mattered to him.

If there is a cathedral in León when you read this — if it exists, if it is magnificent, if it seems larger and grander than the city it serves has any administrative reason to expect — then the arrangement was honored, and the

letter did what it was supposed to do, and a man who died at ninety-one years old and kept his coffin in his bedroom built one more thing after all.

I think he would be satisfied with this.

I am not sure I am, but that is a different question and one I have been sitting with for fourteen years, so I do not expect to resolve it now.

Take care of yourself, Catalina. This country is very beautiful and very difficult and very far from Salamanca, and I do not regret coming here, which surprises me every time I think about it. Tell your children about me if you have any. Tell them their grandfather was a notary who kept two sets of records and was not entirely comfortable about it and did it anyway, which is probably as honest an epitaph as I am going to get.

Your father,

Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche León, Nicaragua

[C.V.: Catalina received no letters from her father after 1547. Whether she was alive is not established by any record I have found. Whether this letter was ever sent is not established either — it was found unsent, misfiled, fourteen years after it was presumably written. I do not know if Rodrigo considered the possibility that it would not reach her and wrote it anyway, in the same spirit in which he made the copy of the letter. I think he probably did.]

Part II

The Architect's Confession

*I should say something about geography before the reader proceeds, because geography is evidence. Nine of the ten documents in this section I found in León — in the Diocesan Archive, in the Archivo Municipal, and in a private collection donated to the cathedral in 1947 whose catalogue has not been updated since. One I found in Seville, in the Archivo General de Indias, in a reading room on the Calle Santo Tomás where the winter light comes through high windows and fails completely by two in the afternoon. The Archivo General de Indias holds the administrative record of the Spanish colonial empire in the Americas. It is in Seville. It is in Spain. The records of what was done in Nicaragua are in Spain. Every Latin American historian knows this. Knowing it does not make it feel less strange to sit in a reading room in Seville in December and open a box labeled *Audiencia de Guatemala, 1748–1751* and find, inside it, the four-sentence filing note of a clerk named Bartolomé Aznar who noticed something about a set of architectural plans, recorded it with the care of a man who believed records were for something, and received no reply. Those four sentences are Document 14 of this edition. I read them perhaps thirty times before I left the building. The ten documents in this section cover one hundred and sixty-one years and move across three countries — Nicaragua, Guatemala, Spain.*

They were written by six people who never met each other. Placed in the sequence I have chosen, they describe one transaction. The reader who prefers another sequence is welcome to it. The transaction will still be visible.

Private Note of Bishop Rodrigo de la Vega

Episcopal private note · c. 1610–1611

Document 8 of 28. Bridge document between Part One and Part Two. Private note of Bishop Rodrigo de la Vega, written in León Viejo at an unknown date during his episcopate (1601–1619). Found loose in the Diocesan Archive of León in 1976, in a folder of episcopal correspondence misfiled with administrative records of the post-1610 relocation.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: A single sheet, written on the back of a draft sermon. The hand is hurried. The paper is stained with what a conservator told me is almost certainly volcanic ash. I include it for what it preserves: the moment a man received the box, was told some part of what it was, and decided to keep it anyway.]*

For the file. Not for the inventory.

I received the cedar box from Bishop Tomás de Mendoza on the third Sunday of Advent, in his rooms, two days before he died. He had me sit. He had the box on the table between us, wrapped in oilskin that I would not have known to recognize as anything but oilskin.

He told me three things.

The first was that the box had been held by every Bishop of this diocese since a date he could not give me, but which was older than the records he kept. The second was that it was not to be opened. He said this twice, in different words, so that I would not mistake the instruction for a suggestion. The third

was that it concerned an arrangement made for the future of this city by men who would not be alive to see whether the future arrived. He said: *the box keeps faith with what was promised. We are not the ones who promised it. We are the ones who keep it.*

I asked him what was promised. He looked at me for some time. Then he said: *a cathedral. Not the one that exists. The one that will. And the means by which it will be paid for, and the names of those who will pay.*

I did not ask further. I have not asked further since.

It is now five months after the mountain. The city is moving. We carry what can be carried and we leave what cannot. I have written instructions for the cedar box to be taken with the diocesan vestments, in the second cart. It will travel under the seal of the diocese, with no description in the manifest. I have spoken with the chief sacristan. He will not ask why.

While this is being decided, other matters claim me which the office requires me to set down. I record here what will not go to the diocesan inventory, because the diocesan inventory is read.

We need priests. The whole province has been left to me with nine presbyters and two deacons, two of the former old and one of them ill. I have written to the Dominican provincial in Guatemala asking for four men. I have been offered two, both below the rule in discipline, which I take to mean that in Guatemala they have none to spare either. I have written to the Franciscan. He has not answered. I will write again when the rains end and the roads become roads again.

Among the men I have, the deacon Valverde — I write the surname with reluctance, and only because this paper will not leave my hand — concerns me. Not for anything that could be set down in a visitation. He gives the doctrine well. He keeps the offices. But I observe how he deals with the Indians of the

western quarter when he believes he is not seen, and I observe how he deals with the widow Cárdenas when he knows he is, and they are two different men. A man who is two men, in the priesthood, is a man who in the end chooses the worse. I have not yet decided what to do. I leave it written here so that it is on record that I saw.

From Tola the parish priest wrote me last week concerning the beata of his parish — I do not give the name, because she has devotees and devotees read what they should not — who has begun to lead public prayers to an image of the Christ Child in the back garden of her house, with candles and singing in the tongue and Friday processions that end at a basin of water she declares blessed by apparitions. She is a good woman. I do not doubt her intention. But the line between the devotion of the people and another thing I do not yet know how to name passes through her garden, and a bishop who does not attend that line ends up bishop of something that is no longer entirely the Church. I have written to the priest instructing him to attend the next three processions and report to me. I have written to her also, with prudence, praising her zeal and reminding her that all devotion must be offered in Latin or in Castilian and under the direction of the parish priest. I do not know if it will suffice. I suspect it will not.

I gather these things on one paper and the administration of the sacred and the administration of the profane appear to me, this afternoon, the offices of the same man. In the morning I order carts and water-jars and manifests; at midday I keep a box whose contents I am not to know; in the afternoon I decide whether a deacon remains in his order and whether a woman may call her water blessed. And all of it, as I was taught, I do in persona Christi. I do not know if Christ administered with this kind of paper. I suspect He did, in the sense in which He sustained everything that was handed to Him.

I do not know what the box contains. I know that Bishop Mendoza believed

it mattered. I know that what he told me was not the whole of what he knew. I know that I am to tell my successor what I was told, and no more, and to require him to do the same. The chain is older than my hand. It will be older than my hand when I am gone.

What I do not understand I leave to God. The chain held. I held it.

Rodrigo de la Vega, Bishop of Nicaragua Without date [c. 1610–1611, in his own hand]

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*[C.V.: Bishop Mendoza's death is recorded as December 18, 1610, three months after the eruption of Momotombo destroyed León Viejo. The "third Sunday of Advent" of 1610 fell on December 13, which would place this transfer five days before his death, not two. Either the Bishop's memory was approximate, or the diocesan calendar did not match the civil one, or he was dictating from a sickbed and the hand that wrote it down was not his own. I have considered all three.

*A separate irregularity that I record here for completeness: the diocesan inventory of 1647 (Document 9 of this collection) places the start of de la Vega's episcopate in 1601 — nine years before the transfer this note describes. By that reckoning Mendoza was not de la Vega's predecessor in the see at the moment of the transfer, and yet de la Vega calls him "the Bishop" and Mendoza tells him "the box had been held by every Bishop of this diocese." The simplest reading is that Mendoza, by 1610, was a former bishop or bishop emeritus who had retained the box informally past his term, and that "every Bishop" was understood by both men to mean the line of office-holders rather than a strict office-to-office succession. The chain of custody, in other words, ran through men, not through the seal. I record the discrepancy because Consuelo cannot in

good conscience report the Advent-date problem and pass over this one in silence.

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The cedar box left León Viejo in the second cart, under the seal of the diocese, with no description in the manifest. A pastoral visitation by Bishop Antonio de Zayas in 1583, the only documentary trace of the box's passage through the intervening generations, lists among the contents of the diocesan strongroom "a sealed coffer of cedar wood, contents not opened since the time of Bishop Mendoza, of which no manifest exists." By 1647 it was in the locked cabinet of the Bishop's study in the new León, recorded as "held under the authority of the Bishop's office by continuous succession." The chain held. It held for one hundred and thirty-eight more years before Bishop Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos placed it on a table in front of an architect named Ignacio Moya in 1748 and began to explain.]

Diocesan Inventory of 1647

Diocesan inventory · 1647

Document 9 of 28. Diocesan inventory recording the cedar box in episcopal storage one hundred and two years after Part One. The second of two bridge documents between Part One and Part Two.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: 1647. León. One hundred and two years after the last document in Part One, the cedar box reappears in an institutional inventory.]*
>
> *This document is included for a single entry. The diocesan inventory of 1647 is a routine administrative record — a comprehensive accounting of ecclesiastical property held by the Diocese of Nicaragua, compiled by order of Bishop Marcos de Morales in the one hundred and sixteenth year after the founding of the diocese. It is thirty-seven pages. I reproduce here only pages 28 and 29, which pertain to the Bishop's private library and document storage. The reader will notice one item.]*

DIOCESAN INVENTORY OF NICARAGUA

Compiled by Order of the Most Reverend Bishop Marcos de Morales

León, Nicaragua, in the Year of Our Lord 1647

Pages 28–29: Bishop's Private Library and Document Storage

[Preceding pages omitted. Inventory continues from page 27.]

Bishop's study, east wall shelving: Thirty-two volumes of theology, mixed provenance, condition good to fair. Six volumes of canon law, Salamanca edition, condition good. Four volumes of colonial administration statutes, condition fair. Two volumes of diocesan history, handwritten, compiled by predecessors, condition fair. One missal, illuminated, condition excellent, value not assessable.

Bishop's study, locked cabinet: One set of diocesan seals, current and retired, in a wooden case. Three folders of active correspondence. One folder of correspondence from predecessor bishops, bundled, tied with cord, not inventoried in detail as per standing instruction. One cedar box, iron-clasped, wrapped in oilskin, condition excellent, contents not examined, held under episcopal seal; entry predates the current register.

The cedar box has been held by this diocese since at least the episcopate of Bishop Rodrigo de la Vega (1601–1619), who recorded it in his own inventory as received from his predecessor, who received it from his predecessor. The chain of custody prior to Bishop de la Vega has not been reconstructed, as the relevant records were lost in the events of 1610.

Contents: not examined. Value: not assessable. Instructions for disposition: the box is to be held by each Bishop in succession and passed to his successor, along with a private oral instruction regarding its significance. The nature of this instruction is not recorded here.

Bishop's study, general storage: Various administrative materials, not individually inventoried.

[Inventory continues on page 30.]

[C.V.: The events of 1610 to which the inventory refers are the eruption of the Momotombo volcano, which destroyed the original city of León — León Viejo, the city where Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche served as notary — and precipitated the relocation of the diocese to its current site. Whatever records preceded Bishop de la Vega's episcopate were lost in that destruction.]

The cedar box was not lost. It moved with the diocese.

Someone carried it out of León Viejo before the eruption, or during it, or immediately after. The inventory does not record who. By 1601, it was already held "by continuous succession." Someone kept the oral instruction alive across the chaos of 1610 and the relocation that followed.

I have thought about this a great deal. A city is destroyed. The church moves. In the transfer of materials from the old city to the new one, someone made certain that a cedar box wrapped in oilskin came with them, and told the next Bishop why, and the next Bishop told the next, for one hundred and sixteen years, until Bishop Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos placed it on a table in front of an architect named Ignacio Moya in 1748 and explained what it was.

It survived. What stays with me is that the people who carried it knew it was worth surviving.]

Bishop's Petition

Episcopal petition · 1745

Document 10 of 28. Part Two: The Architect's Confession. Opens Part Two.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The petition that initiated the cathedral project. It was submitted in 1745 and approved in 1747, a delay of two years that the Bishop's correspondence suggests he found extremely frustrating. I reproduce it in full because it is the official beginning of the story that the other documents tell from the inside.]*
>
> *Between Rodrigo de la Vega's note in Document 8 and this petition lie one hundred and thirty-four years. Eleven bishops passed through the diocese in that time, eight of whom died in office and three of whom left it for reasons the records set down with the elegant reticence of ecclesiastical administration. The cedar box remained in the locked cabinet of the Bishop's study throughout all of those episcopates, and of all of those episcopates only the inventory of 1647 — Document 9 — and this petition survive as a documentary trace of its conscious existence. The silence of the archive between the two pieces does not mean the chain was broken. It means the bishops who held it did not write about it, which was what they had been instructed to do. The chain that is not named is the one that lasts.]*

To the Most Excellent Lords of the Council of the Indies, in the Name of His Majesty Ferdinand VI, King of Castile and León:

Your Excellencies,

I write to you in the hundred and fifteenth year of this diocese's existence in its present location and in the thirteenth year of my own episcopate, on behalf of a city and a people who have waited long enough.

The Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at León, Nicaragua, is not a cathedral. It is a church — a church of reasonable quality for a provincial town of limited resources in 1630, when it was built, but not a cathedral in any meaningful architectural sense of the word, and not a building adequate to the dignity of the episcopal see of a diocese that now encompasses Nicaragua, Honduras, and portions of the territories to the south. The roof requires replacement. The bell tower lists visibly to the east. The nave cannot accommodate the congregation at Easter, a circumstance that requires the celebration of multiple masses on the holiest day of the ecclesiastical year, which is an administrative irregularity that I find spiritually embarrassing.

I petition the Council of the Indies for authorization and funding to construct a new cathedral on the existing site, of proportions appropriate to the diocese's current standing, in accordance with the design specifications that I am prepared to submit upon approval of this petition.

I wish to address, in advance of the Council's deliberations, the question of precedent. I am aware that a cathedral of the scale I am proposing has not been built in this region. I am also aware that the Cathedral of Lima was completed in 1649, that the Cathedral of Mexico City was completed in 1667, and that these constructions were authorized and funded by the same Council to which I now address myself. I do not argue that León is Lima or Mexico City. I argue that León is the capital of a diocese that has existed for more than two centuries, that has generated tax revenue for the Crown throughout that period, that has administered the spiritual affairs of a substantial population across difficult terrain, and that has received, in return, a leaking church with a crooked tower.

I have been patient. I am no longer patient. I am sixty years old and I would like to see a cathedral before I die.

I attach to this petition a preliminary survey of the existing site, a proposed construction budget, and letters of support from three members of the provincial administration. I request that the Council authorize the engagement of a qualified architect and approve a plan for the cathedral's construction at the earliest opportunity the Council's schedule permits.

In humility before the Council and in service to God and His Majesty,

Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos Bishop of Nicaragua León, Nicaragua March 15, 1745

[C.V.: Bishop Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos submitted this petition in 1745 and received the Council's approval in 1747. He was sixty when he wrote it. He died in 1778, at the age of ninety-three. He saw the facade of the cathedral completed but not the towers, and not its consecration. He was patient after all.]

I have searched the archive for earlier correspondence by Venegas de Cienfuegos concerning the box, without success. His episcopal administration generated, according to the diocesan index of 1779, nine hundred and thirty-seven preserved pieces of correspondence, of which I have read three hundred and sixteen. The box appears in none of them. It appears, one time only, in an unsigned marginal note on a sheet of accounts from 1741: "still closed." Three words. The Bishop of Nicaragua was fifty-six years old, was nine years into his episcopate, and had written three words about the object that was going to define his succession. I read them twice to be sure I was reading what I appeared to be reading. I was.]

Council Decree

Council decree · 1747

Document 11 of 28. Part Two: The Architect's Confession.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The approval. Two years after the petition. The Council of the Indies approved the construction of the Cathedral of León in August of 1747 and authorized the engagement of an architect from the colonial workshop system. What the Council did not know — what no one in Madrid knew — was the nature of the plans they were approving. The approved plans are described here as designed by Diego de Porres of Guatemala. They were not the plans that were built.]*

BY AUTHORITY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE INDIES

In the Name of His Majesty Ferdinand VI, King of Castile, León, Aragon, and the Indies:

Having received and considered the petition of the Most Reverend Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos, Bishop of Nicaragua, dated March 15, 1745, and having reviewed the accompanying survey, budget, and letters of support, the Council of the Indies hereby decrees:

First. The construction of a new Cathedral Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the city of León, Nicaragua, is approved. The Council finds the petitioner's description of the existing church's inadequacy credible and the case for a new construction well-founded.

Second. The design submitted with this approval, prepared by the architect

Diego de Porres of Guatemala under the direction of the petitioning Bishop, is accepted as the basis for construction. The design shall be reviewed by a qualified architect appointed to supervise construction, and such modifications as are strictly required by local site conditions shall be permissible within the bounds of the approved budget and with documentation filed with the Council.

Third. Funding for the construction is authorized in the amounts specified in the attached financial instrument, to be disbursed by the Treasurer of the Province of Nicaragua according to the schedule established therein. The diocese is additionally authorized to conduct fundraising among the faithful of the territory for supplementary contributions.

Fourth. The Council directs the Bishop to engage a qualified architect from the colonial workshop system to supervise the construction and to ensure that the completed building conforms to the approved design in all essential respects.

Fifth. The completed cathedral shall be subject to inspection by a representative of the Council before its formal consecration.

The Council notes, for the record, that the petition's tone regarding the adequacy of the Crown's investment in this diocese, while perhaps more pointed than is customary in correspondence of this nature, reflects a legitimate grievance that the Council takes seriously. The approval of this petition should be understood as a recognition of the diocese's long service to the Crown and of the reasonable expectations of a Catholic population in a territory under His Majesty's governance.

Issued under the seal of the Council of the Indies. Madrid, Spain August 3, 1747

[C.V.: Item Four of this decree directed the Bishop to engage an architect from

the colonial workshop system. The Bishop engaged Ignacio Moya. Item Two authorized modifications "strictly required by local site conditions." Ignacio Moya modified the design extensively. Both of these outcomes are technically consistent with the decree's language.]

Commission to Porres

Architectural commission · 1747

Document 12 of 28. Part Two: The Architect's Confession.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: Diego de Porres was commissioned to prepare the initial plans for the cathedral in 1744, three years before the Council of the Indies formally approved the project — a typical arrangement, as petitions required architectural drawings to accompany them. Porres was a skilled architect based in Guatemala City. He prepared the plans without ever coming to León or seeing the site. The plans were prepared for submission to the Council; what subsequently happened to them on the ground was beyond his knowledge or control. His letter of commission is included here because he is the author of the plans that were approved, and he has received essentially no credit in the historical record. He deserves to be named.]*
>
> *I record, besides, a question of method. The historian who deals with a building that took nearly seventy years to rise learns soon that authorship is multiple, contradictory, and often anonymous. Porres drew. Moya built something else. Espinoza supervised. Hernández dressed the stone. Tomasín — of whom the edition will come to speak — laid it. And half a dozen bishops administered the money, the men, and the waiting. A cathedral is signed by no one. But in this country and in this period, not having been signed is frequently confused with not having been made by anyone, which is the most comfortable falsehood with which a history can be written. This edition attempts something else. It begins by naming Porres.]*

Most Excellent Sir,

By the authority of the Most Reverend Bishop of Nicaragua, Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos, and in anticipation of the approval of the petition currently before the Council of the Indies, I write to engage your services as preparing architect for the proposed Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at León, Nicaragua.

You are requested to prepare a complete set of architectural plans for a cathedral of the following specifications: a nave of not less than sixty varas in length; twin towers of not less than twenty-five varas in height; a facade of baroque character appropriate to the dignity of an episcopal see of the second rank; and accommodation for a congregation of not less than eight hundred persons at full occupancy. The plans should reflect the prevailing design standards of the colonial ecclesiastical tradition and should be of sufficient quality to accompany a petition to the Council of the Indies.

You are advised that the site is in the city of León, Nicaragua, and that the local seismic and climatic conditions should be taken into account in the plans to the extent possible given your distance from the site. We understand that you will not be able to conduct a personal site survey; the attached survey notes, prepared by the diocesan surveyor, should provide sufficient information for your purposes.

The fee for this commission is as agreed by private arrangement with the diocesan treasurer.

The plans are required by January of 1745 to accompany the petition.

We thank you for your service to this diocese and to the greater glory of God.

On behalf of the Most Reverend Bishop: Father Esteban Ruiz Secretary to the Bishop of Nicaragua León, Nicaragua October 12, 1744

[C.V.: Diego de Porres delivered the plans in December 1744, three weeks before the deadline. They were submitted with the petition to the Council of the Indies in March 1745. The Council approved them in August 1747. By that time, Ignacio Moya had already been dispatched to León and had begun reviewing the site.]

Porres remained in Guatemala City throughout the construction period, receiving reports of what was being done with his plans. His response to those reports appears as Document 15 of this edition.

The plans he prepared specified a nave of sixty-two varas. Ignacio Moya built seventy-one.]

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: Ignacio Moya arrived in León in March of 1748, one year after the Council of the Indies approved the cathedral project, and remained until the spring of 1752, at which point the construction of the nave was sufficiently advanced that a local overseer could direct the remaining work. He left for Spain in May of 1752. He settled in Seville, where he worked as an independent architect for private clients until his death in 1779. He never returned to the Americas.]*
>
> *This document was found in the cedar box along with the others. It is twenty-two pages. He was fifty-eight when he wrote it. His handwriting is different from any other document in this collection — architectural,*

precise, the hand of a man who spent his life drawing things to scale, in which every line is the correct length or it is wrong. He does not cross out or write in the margins. He wrote this straight through, which I believe means he planned it for a long time before he began.

I will tell the reader one thing before the account begins. Everything Ignacio describes in Sections I through VIII, I was able to verify against other documents in this collection and against records in the Diocesan Archive. He is accurate about the facts. Where he is uncertain, he says so. Where he does not know something, he says that too. I have never edited a document by someone so committed to the honest account of his own dishonesty.

In Section IX, he describes the south transept. I will not comment on Section IX until the reader has read it. Then, in my footnote at the section's end, I will tell the reader what I found inside the south transept wall. By the time they read the footnote, they will already know.]

Account of Ignacio Moya, Architect

Personal account · 1771

Account of Ignacio Moya, Architect

Written in Seville, Spain, in the month of October, in the Year of Our Lord 1771

I.

I am fifty-eight years old and I am writing this in my study in Seville, where the light in October comes in low through the south window and makes everything amber from the third hour onward, which I have always found helpful.

The reason I am writing this is a letter I received last spring from a colleague in Mexico City named Fonseca, who had recently visited León on diocesan business and attended Mass in the cathedral. He described it as magnificent. He described the nave as one of the finest he had seen in the Americas, the proportions exceptional, the light through the west facade extraordinary. He mentioned that no one in León seemed to know much about its architectural history — who had designed it originally, how the plans had developed, what decisions had been made along the way. He asked me, since I had worked there, whether I could enlighten him.

I did not write back.

I have been thinking about his letter for six months. I have decided that the proper response to it is not another letter to Fonseca but this account, addressed to no one in particular, sealed and kept among my papers, to be found or not found as the case may be. I am aware that "addressed to no one in particular" is

a convenient fiction — a man who writes twenty-two pages has an audience in mind, and I am not exempt from this. My audience is whoever finds this, whenever they find it, in whatever world they find it in. If the cathedral is still standing when you read this: good. If it is not: I am sorry. I did the best mathematics I knew.

I will explain what I did. I will explain, as well as I am able to from a distance of twenty years, why I did it. I am not sure the why is as clear as the what, but I am old enough to know that the what without the why is just a police report, and I am not interested in writing a police report.

I considered writing a confession instead. The form would have been familiar. I have known it since I was a child. I drafted three pages of one and put the pages in the fire. The form requires that one know precisely what one is repenting, and I do not — I know what I did, but I am not certain it is the thing the form was designed for.

II.

Before León, there was Guatemala, and before Guatemala there was Cádiz, and before Cádiz there was a childhood that is not relevant here except in one respect: I was trained by my father, who was trained by his, and what my father understood about architecture — what he transmitted to me in twelve years of apprenticeship before I had any alternative — was this: a building is an argument about what space should do to a body. Not an argument about what it should look like. Not an argument about what it should symbolize, or commemorate, or celebrate. An argument about what a body standing inside it should experience. The decoration is secondary. The proportions are the thing.

This sounds simple. It is the most complicated idea I have ever held in my

mind, and I held it for forty years before I began to understand what it meant.

I arrived in Guatemala City in 1741, at the age of twenty-eight, under a contract with the diocesan workshop that I had signed in Cádiz with the confidence of a man who has not yet seen what a contract can mean when the other party has more patience than you do. The contract was for three years. Three years of service to the diocesan workshop in exchange for my passage to the Americas, a modest salary, and the experience that young architects — the contract said this plainly, in the notarial language that I now read with the trained eye of a man who has been on the wrong side of it — require for professional development.

At the end of the three years, I applied for release. The workshop Bishop — a man named Orozco, fat and deliberate, who smelled of turpentine and something sweetish that I never identified — explained that the workshop's current projects required my continued participation and that the release would be granted when the projects permitted. I said that I understood. I applied again the following year. I received the same explanation. The projects never permitted. I was there for six years.

I want to be precise about what six years in the workshop felt like, because it is relevant to the decisions I subsequently made.

The workshop occupied a long building on the north side of the cathedral complex, with a tile roof and high wooden benches and natural light that came from clerestory windows along the south wall, which meant the light in the afternoon was good and in the morning was not. The smell was cedar shavings, linseed oil, and the particular metallic smell of a large room full of people working in concentrated silence. I spent six years at a bench in the third row from the window, drawing plans for projects I did not choose, for clients I did not meet, under the direction of a chief architect who was less technically

capable than I was and aware of this in the particular, resentful way of men who are in charge of people better than themselves.

I was not mistreated. The food was adequate. The salary was what was agreed. I was given no opportunity to leave.

I drew plans. I was good at this. I drew the plans correctly and I made suggestions that were frequently adopted without attribution and I applied my father's argument about space and bodies to every project I touched, even the minor ones, even the sacristies and the rectory additions and the storage buildings, because it was the only thing I knew how to do and because stopping would have been worse than staying.

In the spring of 1747, the notice arrived from León.

III.

The notice came through official channels. A commission letter from the diocese of Nicaragua, addressed to the workshop's Bishop, requesting the loan of a qualified architect for a period of not less than three years to oversee the construction of the Cathedral of León, for which plans had been approved by the Council of the Indies, and for which a local team had been partially assembled but lacked experienced architectural direction. The commission offered a fee, a residence in the city, and — this is the part I remember most precisely, because I read the letter over the Bishop's shoulder and I had to keep my face composed while I read it — upon satisfactory completion of the project, the release of the assigned architect from all remaining contractual obligations to the diocesan workshop.

Bishop Orozco called me to his office the following morning. He offered me the commission in the tone of someone doing me a favor, which was accurate

from his perspective: he was releasing an architect whose contract still had time to run and whom he personally found irritating. I said I would be honored to accept. I left his office and went back to my bench and sat for a long time looking at the cedar shavings on the floor.

I want the reader to understand the condition in which I arrived in León. I was thirty-four years old. I had not built anything of significance in six years. I had spent those years learning, in the particular way that one learns by doing work that is below one's ability, exactly what I was capable of if given the chance. I had also spent those years learning what it meant to have no choice, which is a different education and a more expensive one. By the time the notice arrived, I was not the same man who had signed the contract in Cádiz. I was someone who understood what freedom cost, and what he would pay for it.

I arrived in León in March of 1748, after a journey of five weeks that I will not describe in detail except to say that the rainy season had already begun and the roads from the coast were the roads one expects in a country that has been settled for two hundred years without anyone having solved the problem of mud. The city was smaller than I had expected. The cathedral site was larger. I stood at the edge of it on my first day and felt something I had not felt in six years, which was the precise physical sensation of understanding a space before you have built anything in it. The site told me what the building wanted to be. This is what my father would have called listening to the ground, which sounds mystical and is not: it is a technical observation about elevation, drainage, prevailing wind, the angle of light at different hours, the proximity of other structures. But it feels like listening.

I went to meet the Bishop.

IV.

Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos was sixty-two years old when I met him, a tall man with the kind of health that looks like effort rather than constitution — thin but deliberate about it, careful about food and sleep in the way of someone who has been ill and does not intend to be ill again. He received me in his study in the late afternoon, when the light came through the window behind his desk and made it difficult to see his face clearly, which I subsequently decided was not an accident.

He was courteous. He asked about the journey. He asked about Guatemala and how I had found the work there. He spoke well and listened carefully, which are two different skills and most men have only one.

After approximately twenty minutes of this, he asked whether I had yet reviewed the approved plans for the cathedral.

I said that I had been given a copy on my arrival and had reviewed them that morning.

He said: and what was my assessment.

I considered my answer for a moment. Then I said: the plans were prepared by a very capable architect, and they were prepared for a specific site, and I would need to review them in detail against the conditions here before I could offer a full assessment.

He looked at me for a long moment. He said: that is a diplomatic answer.

I said: I'm an architect. Diplomacy isn't my training.

He said: then give me the honest one.

So I said: the plans were designed for Lima. They account for Lima's soil, Lima's geography, Lima's seismic conditions. León's seismic conditions are not Lima's seismic conditions. The plans as approved would need significant adaptation for this site. More significant than a standard site adaptation. The

adaptations would substantially change the building.

He nodded slowly, as if I had confirmed something.

He said: how substantially.

I said: substantially enough that the two buildings — the León building adapted from these plans, and whatever Lima eventually builds from their own version — would not resemble each other in any meaningful way.

He nodded again.

He rose from his desk and went to a cabinet in the corner of the room — a plain cabinet, cedar, nothing remarkable about it except the care with which he opened it — and he removed a document from inside. He brought it to the desk and placed it in front of me. He did not open it. He set it down between us with both hands, in the center of the table, the way a man sets down something he knows you cannot ignore.

He said: I want to show you something.

V.

The document was a founding agreement. Two signatures at the bottom: Pizarro and Almagro. A third name in the body of the text: Dávila. The date was 1524.

The vellum was old but in good condition — whoever had held this for forty-seven years had kept it flat and dry. The hand was notarial, each letter formed with the deliberate separation of a man who understands that documents must be legible in the next century. The signatures at the bottom were different: angular, rapid, written by men who signed many things quickly. I looked at the document the way I look at a plan — starting from the margins, moving inward, reading for dimension before meaning. There was a phrase in the third

paragraph: *cathedral of the first rank, of the proportions and dignity befitting the precedence established herein.* I could not read what "precedence established herein" meant as a legal matter. I could read *proportions and dignity* as an architect reads them. They were not decorative terms. They were specifications. I began to calculate, roughly, what they required in varas of nave and height of tower, and by the time the Bishop began to explain the document to me I had already understood what he was going to ask.

I am an architect, not a lawyer. I could read enough of the document to understand what it was and what it meant, which is to say I could understand that it constituted a claim — an unfulfilled founding debt from the Peru enterprise — and that the claim was held by the diocese of Nicaragua, which had received it from someone, and that the claim was currently unacknowledged by the Crown but not formally extinguished.

The Bishop explained it to me more fully. He had held this document for seventeen years. It had come to him through his predecessor, who had received it from the notary of the previous century, who had made a copy of a letter — here he paused and said: there is a letter, which I cannot show you, which no longer exists in its original form, but which I have reason to believe you can take on faith — a letter written by a governor who understood what he was doing and why.

He said: the document establishes a prior claim. The claim is for a cathedral of the first rank in this city.

I said: and you intend to use it how.

He said: I intend to use it exactly as he intended it to be used. To ensure that when the plans for this cathedral are adapted for this site, they are adapted in a direction that cannot be reversed. That what León builds is, by any objective measurement, the grander structure.

I said: and the Lima cathedral.

He said: the Lima cathedral will be built from a version of these plans that no one in Lima will think to question, because why would they? The approved plans were approved. No one in Lima knows there is an alternative reading.

I said: and in exchange for my cooperation with this adaptation.

He said: I have already spoken with Bishop Orozco. Your contractual obligations to the workshop are dissolved. You leave León a free man when the project reaches a sufficient stage.

He said this without emphasis, as if it were the minor part of the arrangement. I understood from the way he said it that he knew it was not the minor part.

I looked at the document on the table for a long time. I thought about my father's argument — about space and bodies, about what a building should do to the person standing inside it. I thought about six years at a bench in Guatemala. I thought about the site I had stood on that morning, and what it had told me it wanted to be.

I did not deliberate long. I would like to say I deliberated long. I did not. I decided quickly, and the reason I decided quickly is the thing I have been sitting with for twenty years.

I decided because I wanted to leave. Not because León deserved a better cathedral than Lima, though I believe it does. Not because the commission was a creative opportunity, though it was. Because I wanted to be free, and this was what freedom cost, and I paid it without extended negotiation.

I said: I will need to study the site more carefully before I can tell you exactly what adaptations will be required.

He said: of course.

I said: and the adaptations will be technically defensible. They must be. I will not put my name to something that isn't structurally sound.

He said: I wouldn't want you to. I want a cathedral that stands, Moya. I want a cathedral that stands for three hundred years. I want the argument it makes to be permanent.

He picked up the document and returned it to the cabinet with the same two-handed care. He said: the document stays with me. You don't need it. It's already done what it needs to do.

I left his study and walked back to the site in the late afternoon, and I stood at the edge of it and listened to what the ground was telling me, and I began to plan.

[C.V.: Here in the manuscript the ink changes — Ignacio has paused, perhaps for a day, perhaps for longer. The new ink is darker; the hand is steadier. He has thought about what comes next. He told us in Section II that he does not cross out. There is a single word crossed out at the start of this sixth section that I have left unread, because the line I do not need to read is the line I cannot.]

VI.

What I actually did to the plans I will describe as accurately as I can, for the record if not for any reader's entertainment. It is technical. I will try to make it readable.

The approved plans specified a nave length of sixty-two varas. I extended it to seventy-one. This is not a cosmetic change. Nine additional varas of nave is a different acoustic environment, a different experience of scale from the entrance,

a different relationship between the body of the worshipper and the altar. The person entering a sixty-two vara nave and the person entering a seventy-one vara nave are not having the same experience. They are not in the same building. The structural justification: the site permitted it, the soil bearing capacity was adequate, and a longer nave provides better stability against lateral seismic load. All of this is true. I did not invent the justification. I observed it and then chose which true observations to act on.

The towers. The approved plans called for towers of twenty-eight varas, which is appropriate for Lima's profile. I specified thirty-six. The justification: the exposed position of the site and the prevailing wind patterns required additional mass for stability. This is also true. Also: thirty-six vara towers are visible from the lake and from the road from the coast at a distance that twenty-eight vara towers are not. A cathedral that is visible from a greater distance is making a different argument than one that is not. I made the argument I wanted to make.

The facade. This was the most significant change and the one I am most satisfied with. The Lima plans called for a baroque facade of moderate projection — correct for the Lima site, where the street approach is narrow and projection reads as amplitude. The León approach is from a wide plaza. I redesigned the facade in a lower, wider register, with a horizontal emphasis that distributes the visual weight across the full frontage rather than concentrating it in the towers. The result is a building that appears, from the plaza, to grow out of the ground rather than rise above it. This is what my father meant about space and bodies: the plaza body and the cathedral body are in conversation. The Lima facade would have shouted. The León facade speaks. I prefer speaking to shouting, as a general principle.

I documented all of these changes in the adaptation records. They are in the

archive in León. Anyone who looks at them can see what I changed and how I justified it. The justifications are valid. The justifications are also not the complete story.

The complete story is that I knew exactly what I was doing, and I would do it again, and the only part I am not sure of is the last part.

VII.

The last part is Tomasín.

His name in the labor records is Tomás — Tomasín is what the foremen called him, because he was not large and it is the particular humor of construction sites to call small men by diminutives and large men by the same. He appeared in the workshop in the autumn of 1748, sent up from a coastal community along with three other men under a labor arrangement that I did not control and did not examine as closely as I should have. I know what labor arrangements in this province meant in 1748 and I knew it then and I chose not to examine it because examining it would have required me to object to it and objecting to it would have complicated the project, and complicating the project would have complicated my departure.

I am writing this in Seville in 1771 and I am fifty-eight years old and I would like to say I would make a different choice now. I am not certain I would.

What I can say is this: I recognized, within two weeks of his arrival on site, that Tomasín was the most skilled mason I had worked with in my career. I have worked with skilled masons in Cádiz, in Guatemala, and in León. I know what skilled looks like. It is not speed, though he was fast. It is not accuracy, though he was accurate. It is the thing my father called understanding the weight, which means that a mason who understands the weight knows not just what the plan

specifies but why, and can therefore adapt — within the logic of the structure — when the plan and the site do not perfectly correspond.

They never perfectly correspond. A plan is a theory. A site is the world. Somewhere between the theory and the world, a building happens, and the person who negotiates that gap is not the architect. It is the mason.

Tomasín negotiated it. He read my plans — he could read architectural drawings, which was not something I expected and did not ask him about — and he built what they specified, and when the site required deviation he deviated within the logic of the structure rather than against it. I told him once, in passing, that the south transept's load transfer to the south wall would be complicated by the soil condition in that quadrant. I said this to him because I was thinking aloud; I was not giving an instruction. I watched him think about it for a moment. He looked at the plan, and then he looked at the ground, and then he looked at the plan again, and then he went back to work. What he subsequently built in the south transept is not what the plan specified. It is better than what the plan specified. The load transfer is more elegant. The wall is thicker at the base than I required and thinner at the top, a distribution that is technically superior to my own specification and that I would have arrived at eventually myself if I had been the one holding the trowel.

I did not credit him in the adaptation records. I should have. I am using the word should again and I am aware that I am using it to avoid saying the worse thing, which is: I did not credit him because crediting him would have required me to account for what he was — a man working under a labor arrangement that I preferred not to examine — and I was not willing to do that accounting.

There is a word for this in the catechism. I know the word. I have looked at it on the page. It is closer to what I did than I would prefer. It is not, I have decided, quite the word for it. The catechism speaks of the man who refuses to

see his neighbor. It does not speak of the man who sees his neighbor and chooses not to enter him in the record, for reasons of professional convenience. The latter may be the same sin. I am not the one to decide.

There is one more thing I need to say about Tomasín, which I have been approaching for six pages without quite arriving at.

In the winter of 1751, during the final work on the south transept, I observed him doing something that I did not understand at the time and have been thinking about ever since. He was working on the wall — the outer facing of the south wall, which was nearly complete — and he was not following the plan exactly. He was adding, in a section between the second and third pilasters above the plinth, a small variation in the stone course that was not structurally necessary and not decorative in any conventional sense.

When I asked him about it, he looked at me without expression for a moment and then said, in his Castilian that was always slightly formal, as if he had learned it from a document rather than from people: "The wall needs it here."

I looked at the section. I could see that the variation created a very slight thermal gap — a pocket of space in the wall's mass — that would improve the wall's behavior in the wet season by allowing minor moisture movement without cracking. This was good masonry practice. It was also, I have come to think, not the only thing he was doing.

I did not ask him anything further. I noted it in my records as a site adaptation and moved on.

I have been thinking about that section of wall for twenty years. I have been wondering what he put in it.

VIII.

I left León in May of 1752. The nave was enclosed, the towers were at half their finished height, the facade stonework was begun. A local overseer named Fuentes had been trained adequately for the remaining work, which would take another thirty years — longer, as it turned out; the cathedral was not completed until 1814, which is to say it outlasted everyone involved in its planning and most of those involved in its construction.

Before I left, I went to see the Bishop. He was ill by then — something he had been fighting since the rainy season, he told me, though he struck me as the kind of man whose body would resist any reasonable disease to a standstill. He was in his study, in the chair, with the window closed against the rainy season air. He looked reduced. A tall man who has been ill for long enough loses the habit of his height.

I told him the project was at a sufficient stage for my departure. He said he knew. He said: the papers are prepared. You are free. He said this without emphasis.

I said: the adaptation records are complete. Everything I changed is documented, with justifications.

He said: I know. I've read them.

I said: the justifications are valid.

He said: I know that too.

There was a pause.

I said: and the document in the cabinet.

He said: it will stay where it is. It will pass to my successor with the instructions. Someday someone will ask why the León cathedral is what it is, and the document will be the answer. Or no one will ask, and the cathedral will simply be what it is, which is also fine.

I said: and Tomasín.

He looked at me. He said: what about him.

I said: his labor arrangement.

He said: it's been honored. He received what was agreed.

I said: and after.

He said: after is not my concern. After is the diocese's concern. Moya — he used my name, which he rarely did — you have done what you came to do. You should go.

I went.

IX.

I have been in Seville for nineteen years. I have built fourteen private residences, three commercial buildings, one small church, and one chapel, all of which are competent and none of which are important. I am not complaining. I chose competence and comfort over importance once and I got what I chose, which is more than most men can say.

The cathedral of León, as Fonseca described it, is magnificent. This does not surprise me. What I did, I did well, and what Tomasín did, he did better.

The question I cannot answer — the question I have been sitting with for twenty years, that Fonseca's letter brought back with the force of a physical thing — is this: did Tomasín know what we had done? Did he know that the plans were wrong for the city, originally? Did he know about the Lima plans, the Pizarro document, the arrangement with the Bishop? Did he work in the south transept knowing that the building he was inside was itself an act of subterfuge?

I do not know. I never told him. The Bishop never told him. The labor arrangement gave him no reason to be told.

But he was not a man who seemed not to know things. He read architectural drawings. He thought about load transfer without being asked. He built that section of wall between the second and third pilasters and told me, when I asked, only that *the wall needed it here.*

The wall needed it here.

I have told myself for twenty years that what I did was an architectural decision in the service of a city that deserved a better cathedral than it was officially allocated, and this is true. I have also told myself that the thing I wanted most was to leave, and that the cathedral was the price I paid for leaving, and this is also true. What I do not understand — what I have never understood, and what I am writing this to sit with rather than to resolve — is whether Tomasín was making the same calculation. Whether he also understood two things. Whether the wall between the second and third pilasters was both what I thought it was and something else.

If he put something in that wall, I want whoever finds this to know that I am not surprised. I am not surprised and I am glad. Whatever he put there, it belongs there more than anything else in that building. The building is magnificent, and Fonseca is right, and the light through the west facade must be extraordinary, and I would give a great deal to stand inside it once before I die.

I will not go back. I made that decision when I left and I have not unmade it, and at fifty-eight years old I am disinclined to unmake decisions that have held for nineteen years.

But I think about the south transept. I think about the wall that needed it there. And I think: good. Whatever he put in it, good.

I am aware that this is not how a man of my generation is expected to end an account of this kind. I am expected to ask for prayers. I have considered asking. I find that I cannot ask honestly, which I take to mean that I should not ask at all. The masons of my profession used to inscribe their work *Soli Deo Gloria* — for the glory of God alone. I did not inscribe it. I do not believe Tomasín did either. What is in that wall is something else. I do not have the word for it.

[C.V.: I have surveyed the cathedral's surfaces in the south transept and the surrounding registers, including the area exposed by the 1974 thermal anomaly, and have found no inscription of Soli Deo Gloria *or any equivalent formula. Ignacio's account is verified by absence.]*

Ignacio Moya, Architect Seville, Spain October 1771

[C.V.: In March of 1974, conducting a structural survey of the south transept of the Cathedral of León, I identified a thermal anomaly in the wall between the second and third pilasters above the plinth. I probed it. I found a cedar box wrapped in oilskin. Inside the cedar box there were six documents, of which this account was one.]

Someone put this account in the wall — Tomasín, or whoever followed him in keeping faith with what Tomasín began. The chronology will not allow Tomasín himself to have placed Ignacio's 1771 account inside a wall he had sealed by 1755 and walked away from; what the chronology does allow is that the wall was opened and resealed at least once, by hands I cannot name, in service of a deposit that Tomasín began.

The other documents are his — Rodrigo's counter-ledger, the copy of the letter, the inventory, the Pizarro document. I do not know how he obtained them. I do not know how long he knew they existed. I know that he built the south transept wall in the years 1753 to 1755, that he sealed the box inside it, and that what Ignacio Moya observed and called a "site adaptation" was, in fact, an archive.

Ignacio Moya spent twenty years wondering what Tomasín put in the wall.

He put the truth in it. He put it where someone would eventually find it — and he was right about both, the patience and the tools.

I found it.]

Filing Note

Filing note · 1751

Document 14 of 28. Part Two: The Architect's Confession.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: Bartolomé Aznar filed the adaptation records submitted by Ignacio Moya in 1750 and 1751, documenting the modifications to the approved cathedral plans. His filing note is four sentences. I include it in full because four sentences is the right amount.]*

FILING NOTE — COUNCIL OF THE INDIES *Administrative Records Division, ref. NIC-1747-CAT*

Received from the diocese of Nicaragua, via the Provincial Administration, adaptation records for the Cathedral of León project, dated October 1750 and March 1751, submitted in accordance with Item Two of the Council's approval decree of August 1747.

The adaptation records have been reviewed for compliance with the terms of the decree. The modifications documented therein — extending the nave length, increasing tower height, and redesigning the facade elevation — are accompanied by technical justifications citing local site conditions, seismic considerations, and prevailing wind patterns. The justifications are technically competent.

The modifications are substantial. They are within the letter of the approved decree.

Filed accordingly.

Bartolomé Aznar Clerk, Administrative Records Council of the Indies Madrid, April 14, 1751

[C.V.: "Within the letter of the approved decree." I have been reading colonial administrative documents for twenty years and this is the most precisely placed sentence I have encountered in any of them. Aznar knew. He filed it anyway. I do not know what Aznar knew, or how he knew it, or whether he was paid to file it, or whether he simply read the adaptation records carefully and made an administrative judgment that the modifications were defensible and that his function was to determine whether they were defensible and not to determine whether they were right. I have considered this question at length. I find that I cannot decide.]

Letter from Porres

Personal letter · 1748

Document 15 of 28. Part Two: The Architect's Confession.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: Diego de Porres heard about what had been done to his plans in the spring of 1752, when a colleague returning from Nicaragua described the construction in progress. He wrote this letter to the Bishop immediately. The letter was found in the Diocesan Archive, filed in a bundle marked "correspondence received, 1752." There is no record of a reply.]*

Most Reverend Excellency,

I write from Guatemala City, where I have just received a report from a colleague who recently visited León and observed the cathedral construction in progress. I write to express my profound professional concern about what he described.

I prepared the plans for this cathedral with considerable care. I studied the survey notes your diocese provided. I designed a building appropriate to the site's conditions as I understood them — sixty-two varas of nave, twenty-eight vara towers, a facade of baroque proportion calibrated to the approach from the plaza. These are not arbitrary choices. They are the product of thirty years of architectural experience applied to the specific requirements of a specific commission.

What my colleague described bears essentially no resemblance to what I

designed.

He describes a nave of seventy-one varas — nine more than I designed. The towers, he estimates, rise to thirty-six varas, where I had specified twenty-eight. The facade is of an entirely different character than what I drew — horizontal where I intended vertical projection, understated where I intended declarative. These modifications, he tells me, are the work of an architect named Moya, who was apparently dispatched to supervise construction and who apparently interpreted his supervisory role as extending to a complete redesign of the building.

I wish to be clear: I do not dispute that a qualified architect on site may make modifications required by local conditions. This is standard practice. What my colleague describes is not modification. It is replacement. The building being constructed in León is not my cathedral. It is Moya's cathedral, built on the authorization and funding that were granted for mine.

I ask the Council of the Indies, through Your Excellency's intercession, to explain on what authority these changes were made, whether the adaptation records submitted to the Council accurately represent the scope of what has been altered, and whether any consideration will be given to the question of architectural credit for a design that has been so substantially transformed that the original designer's contribution is no longer recognizable.

I am sixty-four years old. I designed this cathedral as the significant commission of my late career. I ask only that someone explain to me what happened to it.

Diego de Porres, Architect Guatemala City, Guatemala May 3, 1752

[C.V.: There is no record of a reply to this letter in the Diocesan Archive, the

Council of the Indies archive, or the Archivo Histórico Nacional. Diego de Porres died in Guatemala City in 1746, six years before this letter was written. I have considered the possibility that the date is wrong; the handwriting analysis and contextual references defeat that explanation. I do not have a second explanation. I include the letter as I found it. He never received a reply. He never saw the cathedral. In the existing historical literature on the construction of the Cathedral of León, his name appears in one footnote.]

Construction Log, 1749

Construction log · 1749

Document 16 of 28. Part Two: The Architect's Confession.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The construction logs for the Cathedral of León survive in fragmentary form in the Diocesan Archive. They were kept by a series of foremen over the construction period and are, for the most part, records of materials, labor, and progress — the ordinary language of building. I have selected three entries for this edition, corresponding to points of particular significance in the construction history. The first is dated September 14, 1749.]*

CONSTRUCTION LOG — CATHEDRAL OF LEÓN

Kept by Foreman Luis Espinoza under the direction of Architect I. Moya

September 14, 1749

Weather clear. Seventeen men on site. Foundation work continues in the nave section, progressing from the east end toward the crossing. Soil conditions in the southeast quadrant softer than anticipated; consulting with the architect on adjusted footing specifications for that section.

Work on the west facade foundation is suspended pending delivery of additional stone from the quarry at Posoltega, expected within the week.

In the afternoon, a visitor came to the site — a tall man, silver-eyed, older, well-dressed for a traveler. He said he was passing through the city and had

heard there was construction. He walked the foundation trenches for approximately one hour, looking at the soil conditions and the footing work. He asked several questions of the architect that were, from what I could hear, technically informed — about the depth of the footings relative to the bedrock, about the approach to the soft section in the southeast. The architect answered them. The man nodded. He said the footings should go deeper in the southwest corner, where the water table is higher in the rainy season, and that the approach we were using would not account for the lateral load from that direction when the ground moved. The architect reviewed the specifications and agreed. He thanked the man.

The man left without giving his name. He was traveling north, he said, toward the lake.

This week I borrowed three men from the crew that is finishing the sacristy foundation, to shore up the southeast corner while the specifications are being adjusted. They came in the morning and left at midday. Among them was one small man, quiet, who set three ashlars in an hour without measuring, without retouching, without leaving slack for the mortar by way of safety. The master Hernández, who rarely stops to watch another crew's labourer, came over to look at the second stone and stayed for the third. When I asked the sacristy foreman what he was called, he answered with a diminutive I did not catch clearly. He brought his own tools in a folded cloth, and when he left he gathered them up and took them with him. I record this only because I rarely see stone laid with that kind of stillness.

Materials received: forty varas of dressed stone, three carts of lime mortar. Wages this week: ten reales per indio peón, eighteen per maestro, paid four days late. Rations: maize, bean, salt. One worker fell from the second course this afternoon. Buried at the parish before vespers. No other incidents.

Espinoza, Foreman

[C.V.: The southwest corner footing was deepened following this entry, as the adaptation records confirm. The adjustment is credited in the adaptation records to Architect Moya's ongoing site review. The visitor is not mentioned in the adaptation records.]

Letter from Ignacio in Seville

Personal letter · 1771

Document 17 of 28. Part Two: The Architect's Confession.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: Ignacio Moya arrived in Seville in July 1752, two months after leaving León. He wrote to Bishop Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos in September of that year. The letter was found in the Diocesan Archive in a bundle of the Bishop's personal correspondence. It is a short letter. I include it because it is the last thing Ignacio Moya wrote about León before his account of 1771, and because the distance between this letter and that account — nineteen years — is itself a kind of document.]*

Most Reverend Excellency,

I write to inform you that I arrived in Seville in July and have established myself here to my satisfaction. The crossing was difficult but not eventful, which is the best one can say of crossings.

I write also to report, as I believe I owe you a final accounting of my work, that the cathedral project is in a condition that I am satisfied to leave. The nave is enclosed. The towers are at their designed height above the base courses, which is to say roughly half their finished height; this work should proceed without difficulty under Fuentes's supervision, and I believe he understands the remaining specifications well enough to manage the work through its completion. The facade stonework is begun and the character of the final building is established. What follows is execution, and execution is what

Fuentes is capable of.

I believe the building will be what we intended it to be.

I have received a letter from Diego de Porres, forwarded through an acquaintance in Guatemala. He is unhappy about the modifications. I do not know what to say to him. I have not replied. If you find it appropriate to send an explanation on behalf of the diocese, I leave that to your judgment. I am not in a position to offer one that would satisfy him, and I suspect no explanation would, and I am no longer in a position to be usefully involved.

Seville is as I remembered it: old, warm, and considerably less interesting than it believes itself to be. I am glad to be here. I did not expect to be glad.

Thank you for what you gave me, Excellency. I am aware of what it cost you to give it.

Ignacio Moya Seville September 11, 1752

[C.V.: "I am aware of what it cost you to give it." I read this sentence many times before I understood what it meant. It is not about the fee. He is not thanking the Bishop for the commission. He is thanking the Bishop for his freedom — and acknowledging that obtaining it required the Bishop to make an arrangement that the Bishop will carry for the rest of his life. Which he did. Ninety-three years old, and carrying it.]

Part III

The Wall

**Contextual note from Consuelo Vargas Montiel* He put it where someone would eventually find it. He was right about the patience and right about the tools — the two things that matter to those of us who live by the calculation of loads and the calculation of centuries.*

Construction Log, 1753

Construction log · 1753

Document 18 of 28. Part Two: The Architect's Confession.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The second selected entry from the construction logs. This is the first time Tomasín is named in any document in this collection.]*

CONSTRUCTION LOG — CATHEDRAL OF LEÓN

Kept by Foreman Luis Espinoza

March 3, 1753

Weather clear after rain. Fourteen men on site. Work on the south transept walls continues; the north wall of the transept is at the second course above the plinth, progressing normally.

A new man has been assigned to the transept crew this week, brought across from the coastal team that finished work on the sacristy foundation. He goes by Tomasín. He is smaller than most of the crew and quiet. He works carefully.

I put him on the south wall under Hernández, who is responsible for the transept facing work. By the afternoon of his first day, Hernández told me to leave him alone and let him work, because he was doing it correctly and supervision was slowing him down. This is not a common assessment from Hernández, who does not praise men lightly.

Tomasín brought his own tools, which is unusual. They are well-kept. He does not mix them with the other men's tools.

Materials received: two carts of dressed facing stone, one cart of mortar aggregate. Work proceeds on schedule per the revised plan.

Espinoza, Foreman

[C.V.: This is the first entry in which Tomasín appears. The last entry in which he appears is Document 19, dated October 14, 1755 — two years, seven months, and eleven days later. In that time, he built the south transept wall. He also, apparently, did something else.]

Construction Log, 1755

Construction log · 1755

Document 19 of 28. Part Three: The Wall.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The third selected construction log entry. This entry appears at the beginning of Part Three rather than at the end of Part Two because it is the document that opens the question that Part Three answers.]*

CONSTRUCTION LOG — CATHEDRAL OF LEÓN

Kept by Foreman Andrés Castellanos (Espinoza retired from the position due to illness in January 1755; Castellanos took over the log in February of that year.)

October 14, 1755

Weather overcast. Eleven men on site. The south transept facing work is complete. Tomasín finished the last course of the south wall this morning. The wall is, in my assessment and in the assessment of Overseer Fuentes who inspected it this afternoon, exceptional work — consistent facing, excellent mortar joints, true to the plan in all specified dimensions and in several respects beyond what the plan required.

Fuentes noted one section of the wall, between the second and third pilasters above the plinth, where the coursework shows a variation from the standard pattern — a slight inward set of three stones over a span of approximately forty centimeters, filled behind with smaller cut stone. He asked Tomasín about it.

Tomasín said the wall needed it here. Fuentes examined it and found the structural rationale reasonable. He approved it.

The south transept wall is complete. We began the facing work on the north side this afternoon.

As of this date, Tomasín has finished his work on the south transept and has asked to be released from the labor assignment. This request has been forwarded to the Overseer's office per standard procedure.

I note for the record that Tomasín worked on this project for two years and seven months without a single day lost to illness or absence, without a disciplinary incident of any kind, and without a single piece of work that required correction. I do not often write personal assessments in this log. I write this one because the work deserves it.

Castellanos, Foreman

[C.V.: Inside the variation described by Castellanos — the forty-centimeter section between the second and third pilasters — I found the cedar box.]

THE LOST CATHEDRAL

The Mason's Document

Document on amate paper · c. 1755

Consuelo's header note:

> *[C.V.: This document was found inside the south transept wall of the Cathedral of León on the afternoon of March 11, 1974. I had been probing a section of wall between the second and third pilasters, following a thermal anomaly that our equipment had flagged as a void approximately sixteen centimeters deep and forty centimeters wide. The void was real. It had been sealed with a thin tile cut to fit exactly — not cathedral tile, but ordinary workshop tile, the kind used for floors in private houses. Someone had taken a piece of floor tile, cut it with considerable precision, and pressed it into the wall at the level of the third course above the plinth, where the plaster thickness conceals a finger's width of variation. I would not have found it without the equipment. I think that was intentional — it was meant to be found eventually, by someone with better tools than were available in 1755, but not by casual inspection.]*
>
> *Inside the void there was a cedar box wrapped in oilskin. Inside the cedar box there were six documents. Five of them are reproduced in this edition, in the order in which I have determined them to be read. The sixth is reproduced here.*
>
> *The sixth document is written on amate — bark paper, produced by the same method used for pre-contact Nahuatl manuscripts, though this piece is small, approximately ten by fifteen centimeters, folded four times. The writing is in Spanish ink, applied with a metal-tipped pen. The letterforms are careful and slightly irregular, the characters of a*

> *man who learned to write as an adult, under instruction, with patience on both sides. There is no date. There is no salutation. There is no name at the bottom.*
>
> *There are three sentences.*
>
> *I sent a photograph to Dr. Alejandro Reyes Domínguez at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in 1975. His translation and analysis appear as Document 28 of this edition. The translation below is his, with one amendment of my own, noted.]*

Original Text

Notoca Cuauhtlanextli. Amo notoca Tomasín.

Ica notlahtlacol ōnicchīuh inin tepantli.

Nicān ōnictlālih in neltiliztli; ahzo ticmati.

Translation

Translated by Dr. Alejandro Reyes Domínguez, UNAM, Department of Mesoamerican Languages, 1975. One amendment by C. Vargas, noted.

My name is Cuauhtli-Tlanextli. My name is not Tomasín.

With my sin I made this wall.*

Here I have placed the truth; perhaps you will know it.

** Dr. Reyes Domínguez translates* notlatlacol *here as "my fault" or "my*

transgression." I have translated it as "my sin" because the word in Nahuatl carries the religious weight of both meanings simultaneously, and Cuauhtli-Tlanextli was, by the time he wrote this, a baptized Catholic who had spent six years working inside a cathedral. He knew what the word meant in both systems. I believe he chose it deliberately. — C.V.

[C.V.: I am going to depart from my editorial practice here, which has been to let the documents speak for themselves and to confine my observations to matters of historical fact, translation, and provenance.]

My name is Consuelo Vargas Montiel. I was born in Managua in 1938. I am a structural architect. I have spent thirty years studying buildings that other people built — measuring their walls, reading the specifications of men long dead, learning the names of the engineers who designed them and the craftsmen who executed the designs, and then recording those names in official documents and architectural histories. I am good at this. I hold a doctorate from the Universidad de Sevilla and a teaching position at the Universidad Nacional, and I have published three monographs on colonial ecclesiastical architecture in Central America, none of which anyone outside my immediate field has read, which is as it should be.

I have spent four years with their handwriting. I do not know Cuauhtli-Tlanextli's handwriting. I have three sentences.

He wrote in careful, slightly irregular characters, as I have said. He used amate — which means he prepared this, or had it prepared, in advance. He did not write this on a scrap of whatever was at hand. He thought about what material would last. He folded the paper four times and wrapped it in the same oilskin that covers the cedar box, which means he either obtained the oilskin

independently or had access to the box before it was sealed. His document went at the bottom, beneath the others. He was last.

He knew someone would read it. He put it where someone with adequate tools and sufficient patience would find it — and he was right about both, though he overestimated by approximately two centuries how long the tools would take to arrive.

His name is Cuauhtli-Tlanextli. It means Eagle of Living Light — the light that moves, not the light that is fixed. He was called Tomasín, which is a diminutive of Tomás, which is a name that was given to him, which is not his name. He spent six years building a cathedral in a language that was not his, for a God that was not his, under a bishop whose name appears in seventeen documents in this edition and whose face appears in a portrait in the cathedral's sacristy. Cuauhtli-Tlanextli does not appear in the portrait. He does not appear anywhere by name until this document, which he wrote himself and placed himself and sealed himself inside his own wall.

*He said he built the south transept with his sin.

Dr. Reyes Domínguez and I have discussed this phrase at length. The sin could be the act of deception — of building a wall that conceals what it conceals. It could be his participation in an institution he did not choose. It could be something else entirely, something we cannot recover, the private accounting of a man we know almost nothing about. I have stopped trying to decide which sin he meant. He named it. He put it in the wall with everything else, and then he covered it with stone.*

The ahzo *— perhaps — is the part that does not leave me alone. He was not certain we would understand. He was not certain the truth would be legible to whoever found it, separated from him by whatever span of years he imagined. He put it there anyway. He sealed the wall. He went back to work.*

I still think it is beautiful.]

The Lima Letter

Diocesan letter · November 1763

Document 21 of 28. Part Three: The Wall.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: These documents are what surrounded it.]*
>
> *The Lima letter. It was found in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, in a bundle of miscellaneous ecclesiastical correspondence from the viceroyalty of Peru. It was not filed with the León materials. I found it by accident, cross-referencing a reference number from the Council's Nicaragua file. The letter is about the Lima cathedral project, which was being revised in the 1760s. It is reproduced here in abbreviated form. The reader's attention is directed to the final paragraph.]*

[Abbreviated. Full text available in the Archivo General de Indias, Peru section, bundle 1763-XVII.]

To the Most Excellent Lords of the Council of the Indies:

We write to request the Council's guidance on a question arising from the current revision of the Cathedral of Lima project, specifically regarding the architectural plans held by this diocese and their relationship to the plans approved for the Cathedral of León, Nicaragua.

It has come to our attention that the León cathedral, currently in an advanced state of construction, presents certain significant differences from the plans as submitted to the Council. We have obtained, through channels available to us, a

copy of the adaptation records filed by the supervising architect at León, and we note that the modifications described therein — substantially extending the nave, heightening the towers, and redesigning the facade — represent changes that, if applied in reverse, would produce a building very similar to the plans currently held by our diocese for the Lima project.

We do not make any formal allegation at this time. We request only that the Council clarify the provenance of both sets of plans and confirm that the León modifications were made purely on the basis of local site conditions, as the adaptation records claim.

[Additional pages omitted.]

In other matters, unrelated to the foregoing: a member of our diocesan staff, returning from a journey through Central America, reports an unusual encounter in León. Near the cathedral site, he spoke with an elderly man — very tall, with silver eyes unusual for this region, who appeared to be in excellent health despite what our staff member estimated as an advanced age. The man spoke with considerable knowledge of the construction and its history, and made several observations about the cathedral's proportions that our staff member, who has some architectural training, found technically sophisticated. When asked how he knew so much about the building, he said that he had been following its construction with interest for some time. He did not give his name.

We mention this only as a curious detail of the journey, of no particular significance.

In service to God and His Majesty, The Office of the Bishop of Lima Lima, Peru November 12, 1763

[C.V.: The first occurrence of this description is in Document 16. The second is here. The third is in Document 26.]

Confession in Extremis

Confession in extremis · 1771

Document 22 of 28. Part Three: The Wall.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: In the autumn of 1771, Bishop Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos fell gravely ill at the age of eighty-six. The illness lasted three weeks. His confessor, Father Hernán Cáceres, attended him throughout and recorded this confession, made on what all parties believed to be the Bishop's deathbed, on the night of October 19, 1771. The Bishop recovered. He lived another seven years.]*
>
> *Father Cáceres kept the record. It was found in his private papers, donated to the Diocesan Archive after his death in 1803. The Bishop was not informed that the record had been kept. Whether he would have objected is a question I cannot answer.]*

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and in accordance with my duties as confessor to the Most Reverend Bishop Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos, I, Father Hernán Cáceres, do record the following confession, made by the Bishop on the night of October 19, 1771, in the belief that he would not survive the night.

The Bishop spoke slowly, with considerable effort, in a voice I could barely hear. I have recorded what I heard as accurately as I am able. Where I am uncertain, I have noted it.

He said he wanted to confess a deception. He said it had been a long deception and he had decided it was not wrong but that he wanted to say it aloud before God in case he had decided incorrectly.

He said: I used a document that was not mine to use, for a purpose it was not designed for, in order to obtain something I believed my city deserved. I used it as leverage with a man whose freedom I purchased with the diocese's integrity. I did this deliberately and with considerable planning. I would do it again. But I want God to know I knew what I was doing.

He said: the document is in the cathedral. I put it there because I did not know what else to do with it, and because the man who gave it to me intended it for the building, and the building seemed like the right place. I put it in the wall. I gave it to the mason because the mason was the only person involved who I trusted to understand what he was holding. I told him where it should go. He decided how.

He said — here his voice dropped and I leaned close to hear — he said: the mason understood two things at once. He said this as if it explained something. Perhaps it did.

He said: the cathedral is beautiful. I have seen it every day for twenty years, and it is the best thing I have done, and I did it by deceiving the Council of the Indies and purchasing a man's freedom with a lie about the provenance of his plans. I want to confess this before I die.

He said: I am not sorry. I want to confess it and I want to be clear that I am not sorry. I am prepared to answer to God for it if God finds it insufficient. I believe God will not find it insufficient.

He stopped speaking for a time.

He said, after a while: I think the man who made it possible — the old

governor, two hundred years ago — I think he would consider this a satisfactory outcome. I hope he would.

[Uncertain — I could not clearly hear what he said next. He said something about a notary. He said the notary understood. This may have been what he said.]

He asked for absolution.

I gave it.

Recorded faithfully this twentieth day of October, in the Year of Our Lord 1771. Father Hernán Cáceres

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[C.V.: Bishop Venegas de Cienfuegos recovered from the illness. He continued as Bishop of Nicaragua until his death in 1778, at the age of ninety-three. He never spoke publicly about the cathedral's construction history. He never, as far as I can determine, told anyone about the cedar box or its contents.]

The cathedral was completed in 1814, thirty-six years after his death. He never saw it consecrated.

Father Cáceres's final line: "He asked for absolution. I gave it." I have nothing to add to this.]

Final Construction Log, 1783

Construction log · 1783

Document 23 of 28. Part Three: The Wall.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The last entry of the construction log kept under Overseer Fuentes, written on the final day of 1783. The log continues after this under a different overseer, but this is the entry that closes the generation that built the cathedral's body. The towers are complete. The nave vaulting is complete. What remains is interior work — plasterwork, decoration, the altar, the choir — which will take another thirty years. But the shell is there. The building that stands today is the building that existed on December 31, 1783.]*

CONSTRUCTION LOG — CATHEDRAL OF LEÓN

Kept by Overseer Miguel Fuentes

December 31, 1783

Weather cold and clear. The last day of the year. I have been keeping this log, in whole or in part, for thirty-five years. This is the last entry I will write. My sight has deteriorated to the point where I cannot manage the responsibility of the construction record, and I have arranged for my assistant Ramírez to take over the log from the first of January.

I want to record, for anyone who reads this log after me, what was built.

The nave we built is the nave we built. The towers stand where they were

going to stand. The facade faces the plaza in a long, low, horizontal line that in the afternoon light appears to grow out of the ground, which is what the architect intended, or so he told me. The crossing vault is complete. The choir vaults are complete. The south transept is complete, has been complete since 1755, and is in my thirty-five years of observation the finest stonework on the site — the south wall in particular, which was built by a mason I remember well, small, quiet, careful, who worked for two years and seven months and never required correction and then left.

The building is not finished. It will take more years. But the building is there. You can stand inside it and feel what it will be, which is more than I could say when I started.

I have spent my adult life on this site. I was twenty-two when I arrived to assist Architect Moya and I am fifty-seven now. I built less of it than Tomasín and more of it than the Bishop, and I have made my peace with that accounting.

May God keep this building standing.

Miguel Fuentes, Overseer León, Nicaragua December 31, 1783

[C.V.: "You can stand inside it and feel what it will be." I read this sentence in a reading room in the Diocesan Archive on an afternoon in October 1974, seven months after I found the cedar box. I had been standing inside the cathedral that morning for the survey work. I knew exactly what he meant.]

Petition for Release Filed by Tomasín

Labor petition · November 1755

Document 24 of 28. Part Three: The Wall.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: This document is from 1755 — the year the south transept wall was completed, and twenty-eight years before the preceding log entry. Tomasín filed this petition himself. It is the only document in which he speaks in the first person. These are the only official documents in which he is named.]*

[Petition to the Overseer of Works, León, Nicaragua, November 1755]

The undersigned requests that release from his labor obligations on the Cathedral of León construction project be granted, pursuant to the conditions applicable to workers who have completed their assigned work before the end of the contracted term.

The work assigned to the undersigned — the facing of the south wall of the transept, between the second and third pilasters — is complete. The overseer has certified the quality of the work. Nothing of the original assignment remains to be done.

The work that was assigned to the undersigned is complete. The work that was not assigned is also complete. The undersigned requests payment of wages owed and documentation of release.

Tomasín León, Nicaragua November 1755

[C.V.: The petition was granted. The documentation of release is dated November 18, 1755. Tomasín's signature on this petition is the only example of his writing in Spanish that I have found.]

He built the variation between the second and third pilasters in the final months of his work on the wall, before its completion in October 1755. By the time of his petition for release the variation was already in place.]

Inventory of Decorative Stonework

Decorative inventory · 1780

Document 25 of 28. Part Three: The Wall.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: In 1780, as the interior decoration of the south transept was being finalized, the diocesan administration commissioned an inventory of the decorative stonework in that section. The inventory was compiled by a clerk named Pacheco. It is a straightforward document. I direct the reader's attention to Item 7.]*

INVENTORY OF DECORATIVE STONEWORK — SOUTH TRANSEPT

Compiled by order of the Diocese of Nicaragua Compiled by Isidro Pacheco, Diocesan Clerk October 1780

Item 1. Four engaged pilasters, south wall, carved to specification per the approved decorative plan. Condition excellent.

Item 2. Carved string course running full length of south wall at impost height, floral motif. Executed by the workshop of carver Hernández. Condition excellent.

Item 3. Window surrounds, three openings in south wall, carved stone with geometric motif. Executed per approved design. Condition excellent.

Item 4. Carved corbels at the transept crossing, eight in number, floral and geometric motif. Executed by the workshop of carver Hernández. Condition

excellent.

Item 5. Carved frieze above south doorway, figural motif including angels and vine-work. Executed per approved design. Condition excellent.

Item 6. Carved inscription panel above south doorway, Latin text per the Bishop's direction: *LAUDATE DOMINUM OMNES GENTES.* Condition excellent.

Item 7. Between the second and third pilasters of the south wall, at the level of the first gallery course, a section of the facing stonework shows an unusual carved element that does not appear in the approved decorative plan: three small figures, approximately eight centimeters in height, worked into the facing stone with considerable skill. The figures appear to represent three human forms — two adult, one small — rendered in a style that is not the conventional colonial ecclesiastical style used elsewhere in the transept, but rather a style the compiler cannot specifically identify. The figures are partially concealed by the pilaster shadow and would not be noticed by a casual observer. When this element was brought to the attention of the Overseer's office, the response received was that the carving appears to date from the original construction period and that no record of it exists in the construction documentation. The Overseer's office advised that it be left in place.

The element is noted here for completeness.

Item 8. General condition of south transept stonework: excellent throughout. The facing work on the south wall is assessed as the finest stonework in the completed sections of the cathedral.

Isidro Pacheco, Clerk León, Nicaragua October 28, 1780

[C.V.: Three figures. Two adult, one small. I examined this carving on March

14, 1974 — three days after I found the cedar box, and before I had read any of the documents it contained. I photographed it. The photograph is in my research notes (Document 27 of this edition).]

When I later read Item 7 in this inventory, I went back to the carving and looked at it for a long time.

The style Pacheco "cannot specifically identify" is consistent with pre-contact Mesoamerican figural carving — the elongated forms, the frontal stance, the integrated posture. It is the only element in the cathedral that is. I do not know who the three figures represent. I have a hypothesis. I will not record it here.]

The Visiting Bishop

Personal account · 1790

Document 26 of 28. Part Three: The Wall. Closes Part Three.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The Bishop of Guatemala visited León in the spring of 1790 on a tour of the Central American dioceses. He wrote to the Archbishop of Mexico City about his visit. The letter is partly administrative and partly personal. I reproduce only the personal portion. The reader's attention is directed to the fourth paragraph.]*

[Administrative portion omitted.]

The Cathedral of León is extraordinary. I had been warned by colleagues that it exceeded expectations and I had taken this with the grain of salt one applies to colleagues' descriptions of buildings they have admired, but in this case the warning was accurate. The building is too large for the city — substantially too large, in the way that suggests someone made a decision rather than a mistake — and the interior is one of the finest I have seen in the Americas. The nave proportions are unusual: lower and wider than the Lima tradition, with a quality of horizontal weight that reads from the entrance as almost geological, as if the building has grown up from the ground rather than been set upon it. The south transept in particular is exceptional. I spent a considerable time there.

I met the new Bishop — Ramírez, who has held the position since the death of old Venegas de Cienfuegos twelve years ago — and found him capable and well-oriented to his diocese. He showed me the diocese's records with

appropriate pride. I did not ask about the cathedral's architectural history. I had the impression that there were things in that history which the current Bishop knows only partially and would prefer not to have probed by a visitor.

León itself is a pleasant city, dusty in the dry season, considerably less so in the rains. The population is mixed and largely poor, with a significant indigenous community in the western quarters. They seem to regard the cathedral with the appropriate mixture of pride and bewilderment — pride because it is manifestly one of the finest buildings in the Americas, bewilderment because it is manifestly too grand for a city of this size. The bewilderment is not unfounded.

Two days later, on the morning of my departure, I encountered an old man sitting in the south transept. He was very tall, with an upright bearing despite his evident age, and he had eyes of an unusual pale color — silver, I would say, though this may be the light in that part of the building, which is particular. He was examining the carving between the second and third pilasters as if he had seen it before. I asked if he was a local. He said he had been coming to this building for a long time. I asked how long. He said: since before the towers were finished. He said this as if it were a simple statement of fact, though the towers were completed in the 1760s, which would make him extraordinarily old, and he did not look extraordinarily old — old, certainly, but not impossibly so. I did not press the question. He had the quality of a man who does not explain himself and does not expect to be asked to.

He said: the building is an argument. I asked what argument. He said: that a man's intention outlasts him. Then he said he had an appointment and left, and I watched him walk out of the south transept into the nave, and by the time I reached the nave myself he was gone.

I mention this only because I found it a fitting valediction for a building that

produces, in me at least, the distinct sensation of a presence that I cannot account for architecturally. Perhaps all great buildings do this. I have visited many buildings and I am not certain all of them do.

Yours in God, The Bishop of Guatemala Guatemala City April 12, 1790

Part IV

Whoever Builds

The two documents in this section are not from the cedar box. They come from the years after the opening — from the work of reading and traveling and translating that followed March 11, 1974. I include them because an edition that presents the decisions of dead people while concealing the decisions of the living editor is performing an evasion I have spent four years studying. I have tried, in this work, not to replicate what I am studying. The first document is my research notes from the Archivo General de Indias, made across two visits to Seville in December 1975 and January 1976. They are not literature. They are the working notes of an architect in a foreign archive — written on index cards in pencil, in the margins of catalogue references, and copied more carefully in a hotel room near the Alameda de Hércules on three consecutive evenings. The window of that room looked onto a street where the orange trees were fruiting, and after weeks of reading four-hundred-year-old documents about my country, the oranges seemed, I admit, almost aggressively alive. The second is a letter from Dr. Alejandro Reyes Domínguez at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. He was the first person besides me to know what the cedar box contained. I sent him a photograph of the amate document in March 1975. He replied in October of that year. What he said is in the letter. What neither of us

*said — what I have not said anywhere in the apparatus preceding this final section — belongs now to the reader. I have done what I can do. The *ahzo* belongs to whoever is holding this.*

Research Notes — Archivo General de Indias

Editor's research notes · 1974 – 1976

Document 27 of 28. Part Four: Whoever Builds.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: I include my own research notes because the process of finding the documents in the archive is, in a modest way, part of the story these documents tell. I have selected entries from the fourteen months I spent in archival research, primarily in Seville, between 1975 and 1977. They are not literary. They are notes.]*
>
> *I am in Seville. I have photographs of the cedar box. I do not yet have everything.]*

RESEARCH NOTES — ARCHIVO GENERAL DE INDIAS, SEVILLE

Selected entries

December 3, 1975 — Day 1, Seville

Arrived yesterday. Reading room opens at nine. I am the only person working in the Central America section this week, which is typical for a diocesan construction history project and which I find, as always, both lonely and clarifying. When no one else is looking for what you're looking for, either you're wrong about its importance or you're the first.

I am starting with the Council of the Indies' Nicaragua file. I know the

approval decree exists; I found a reference in the Diocesan Archive in León. I need to find the original here and the correspondence surrounding it.

December 7, 1975

Found the approval decree (Document 11 in my working catalogue). Standard language, nothing unusual. Found the accompanying letter from the Bishop's secretary submitting the plans (Document 12 in working catalogue — the commission to Porres). Porres delivered plans on time. Plans are described as approved. This is all consistent with what I already knew.

What I cannot find: any record of the adaptation records that Moya apparently filed in 1750–51. They should be in the Nicaragua file. They are not.

December 14, 1975

Cross-referenced the Nicaragua file reference numbers against the administrative records index. Found a discrepancy: two items referenced in the 1751 index do not appear in the current file. This could mean they were misfiled, or removed for separate review, or lost. It could mean they were never filed.

Asked the archivist. She said materials are occasionally misfiled when they concern more than one territory. She suggested I check the Peru section.

December 17, 1975

Found the Lima letter (Document 21 in working catalogue) misfiled in the Peru section, bundle 1763-XVII. I was looking for the missing adaptation records. I read it three times. The Council had been asked, by Lima, to clarify the relationship between the two sets of plans, and the file shows no response — Aznar's filing note is the closest thing to one.

I sat in the reading room for a while after I understood this. The archivist asked if I needed anything. I said no.

January 8, 1976

Found the adaptation records, misfiled in the Guatemala section with the Porres materials. They were misfiled deliberately or by accident; I cannot tell. The adaptation records document every change Moya made and provide technical justifications for all of them. The justifications are adequate. The changes are extraordinary.

Moya added nine varas of nave. He raised the towers eight varas. He redesigned the facade entirely. He did all of this while filing technically defensible justifications with the Council. And the Council filed the justifications without substantive response.

The building in León is not the building that was approved. Everyone involved knew this. No one said so.

October 8, 1976 — Managua

Back from Seville. Have been working on the transcriptions and translation. The Nahuatl document sent to Dr. Reyes Domínguez in March; reply received in October (Document 28 in working catalogue).

Visited León last week to re-examine the south transept. Went back to the carving between the second and third pilasters. Spent an hour with it. Three figures, as Pacheco's inventory describes. I know who they are. I am not going to write it in these notes.

March 11, 1977. León. Third anniversary of finding the box.

I went to the cathedral at first light. The façade is wider than memory makes it. From the plaza you read the two bell towers, the recessed pediment, the late insertion of the neoclassical portal that does not match the rest. Inside, the nave reads as longer than it is — a hundred and three meters, paced — because the side aisles are narrower than the liturgical proportion calls for and the eye

corrects forward. The light at this hour comes through the south transept clerestory and lands on the floor in a long bar that crosses the crossing and stops at the third pilaster of the north side. That bar will not be there in an hour. It is there now.

I stood in front of the south transept wall for the time it took the bar of light to move ten centimeters. Then I left. There is nothing more to say about a building you have stood in front of. The building does what it does. The wall holds what it holds.

Letter from Reyes Domínguez

Scholarly correspondence · 1976

Document 28 of 28. Part Four: Whoever Builds. Closes the edition before the Mason's Document.

Consuelo's section note:

> *[C.V.: The last document before the Mason's Document itself. Dr. Reyes Domínguez is a specialist in colonial and pre-contact Nahuatl at UNAM. I sent him a photograph of the bark-paper document in March 1975. He replied in October. His letter is the last external voice in this edition. After it, there is only Tomasín.]*

Dear Dr. Vargas,

Thank you for sending me the photograph. I have been working with it since April, and I apologize for the delay in my reply — I wanted to be certain before I wrote to you, and certainty, with a document of this kind, takes time.

I will give you my findings in three parts: the linguistic analysis, the translation, and then one further observation that is not strictly within my area of expertise but that I believe you should have.

On the language. The three sentences are in Classical Nahuatl, of a type consistent with the mid-eighteenth century — that is, Nahuatl as it was spoken and written by educated indigenous persons in New Spain during the colonial period, influenced by contact with Spanish but retaining the core grammatical structure intact. The writer was fluent. This is not a document written by someone who had been taught a few phrases. The writer thought in Nahuatl. The

Spanish-influenced elements in the orthography are those of a person who could write in both systems and was choosing to write in one of them. The choice was deliberate.

On the translation. The three sentences read as follows. I give you my translation, with notes on contested terms.

Notoca Cuauhtlanextli. Amo notoca Tomasín. My name is Cuauhtli-Tlanextli. My name is not Tomasín.

Notoca is the standard first-person possessive form with the vocative root *toca* — "my name." The name Cuauhtlanextli is a compound of *cuauhtli* (eagle) and *tlanextli* (light, radiance — specifically the kind of light that moves, as distinct from fixed luminescence). In the document the two elements are written as a single word, as is standard in Classical Nahuatl name formation. The name means, approximately, Eagle of Radiant Light. It is a proper Nahuatl name, not a baptismal name. The contrast with Tomasín — a Spanish diminutive — is the sentence's entire meaning.

Ica notlahtlacol ōnicchīuh inin tepantli. With my fault I made this wall.

Ica notlahtlacol — "with my sin" — is the instrumental, fronted to begin the sentence. *Ica* is the standard comitative-instrumental preposition; *notlahtlacol* is first-person singular possessive of *tlahtlacolli* — transgression, sin, fault. In pre-contact Nahuatl, *tlahtlacolli* carried the meaning of a violation of cosmic order; in Catholic colonial Nahuatl, it acquired the meaning of sin in the Christian sense. The writer, as a baptized Catholic who had spent years in a cathedral workshop, would have been fully aware of both registers. I do not believe the ambiguity is accidental. I hesitated for some weeks between "my fault" and "my transgression," and have settled, in this draft, on "my fault." You may prefer "my transgression" — or, if you wish to bring the Christian register fully forward, "my sin." All three are defensible. None of them is complete; the

choice is yours as editor of the edition. *Ōnicchīuh* is first-person singular completed past of *chihua*, to make or build — the *ō-* augment marks the action as finished, sealed. *Inin tepantli* — "this wall" — *tepantli* is the ordinary term for a built masonry wall. The fronting of *ica notlahtlacol* gives the sin priority in the sentence's order: it is the first thing stated, the instrument of making. The English cannot quite reproduce that sequence without losing something.

Nicān ōnictlālih in neltiliztli; ahzo ticmati. Here I have placed the truth; perhaps you will know it.

Nicān — "here." *Ōnictlālih* is first-person singular completed past of *tlālia*, to place or set — the preterite form, the *ō-* augment marking the action as finished: "I have placed it." *In neltiliztli* — "the truth" — is a nominalized form of *nelli*, true, and carries the literary and solemn register of formal written Nahuatl: the register of wills, annals, and *huehuetlatolli*. This is not everyday speech. It is the vocabulary of someone writing with deliberate weight. *Ahzo ticmati* — "perhaps you will know it" — is the conditional second person: *ticmati* (you know, you understand) with *ahzo* (perhaps, maybe) preceding the verb, as it consistently does in attested texts. The *ahzo* is doing the most work in the sentence. He is not certain we will understand. He placed the truth inside the wall anyway.

On a further observation. I am a linguist, not a historian, and what I am about to say exceeds my training. But I have been working with this document for six months and I feel I owe you my full response.

The name Cuauhtli-Tlanextli is not a baptismal name and would not have appeared in any colonial official record. A man working under colonial labor arrangements would have been known by his baptismal name — in this case, Tomás, diminutive Tomasín. His Nahuatl name was his own, held privately, given at birth or coming-of-age in the traditional manner, and carried in parallel

with the colonial name throughout his life.

He wrote his private name on bark paper in his first language. He placed it in a wall that he built. He expected — with the conditional *ahzo* — that someone might eventually understand it.

I have spent twenty years studying Nahuatl documents from the colonial period. Most of them are documents of conversion — of a language being transformed by contact with another, of people recording their lives in a tongue that was being slowly replaced. They are often documents of loss.

This one is not a document of loss. This is a document of keeping. He kept his name and his language, and he placed both of them in a place he built with his hands, in a building whose plans came from somewhere else, for reasons he may or may not have known, and he wrote on bark paper the three things he needed to say.

I find this, Dr. Vargas, remarkable. I thought you should know that I find it remarkable. Scholars are sometimes reluctant to say when a document moves them. I am not reluctant. This one did.

Please let me know if you need further analysis. I would be glad to continue.

With respect and admiration for your work,

Dr. Alejandro Reyes Domínguez Departamento de Lenguas Mesoamericanas Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Mexico City, October 14, 1975

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*[C.V.: "This is a document of keeping." I read this letter in my apartment in Managua on a Tuesday evening in November 1975, and I sat with it for a long time.

I wrote back to Dr. Reyes Domínguez the following week. I told him that I

had taken his draft translation and amended one word: I had moved "my fault" to "my sin." I could not justify the choice in linguistic terms — he would always have the better of that argument — and I did not try to. I told him I made the choice as a person who had read the document many times and as someone whose conscience the word touched. He wrote back that he understood, and that the amendment was mine to make. The published translation in Document 20 carries my amendment, with his analysis, and is footnoted there.]*

Notoca Cuauhtlanextli. Amo notoca Tomasín.

Ica notlahtlacol ōnicchīuh inin tepantli.

Nicān ōnictlālih in neltiliztli; ahzo ticmati.

What the reader makes of that is the reader's business.

End of the edition

The Lost Cathedral

Edited by Consuelo Vargas Montiel

Plates and visual reconstructions

The images that follow accompany the edition. Some are photographs of real places and archives that appear in the documents; the rest are visual reconstructions of imagined people and objects, not reproductions of historical originals.

Antecedents — before Nicaragua

Plate 01

Universal chart by Diego Ribeiro, 1529. Detail of the Padrón Real held at the Vatican Apostolic Library.

Credit: Visual reconstruction in the style of the Seville cartographic workshop.

Plate 02

Pedrarias Dávila (1440 – 1531), governor of Castilla del Oro and of Nicaragua. Seventeenth-century engraving style.

Credit: Reconstruction in the manner of the engravings in Antonio de Herrera's General History.

Plate 03

Francisco Pizarro, equestrian portrait. Sixteenth-century Spanish colonial painting style.

Credit: Visual reconstruction in the manner of the Madrid workshop portraits.

León Viejo, 1524 – 1610

Plate 04

Ruins of León Viejo, founded 1524 and abandoned after the 1610 eruption. Momotombo in the distance.

Credit: Visual reconstruction of the archaeological site, UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2000.

Plate 05

Momotombo volcano from the shore of Lake Managua. 1297 m. Active since the sixteenth century.

Credit: Visual reconstruction of the Nicaraguan volcanic landscape.

The Cathedral of the Assumption, León

Plate 06

Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, León, Nicaragua. UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2011.

Credit: Photograph. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Plate 07

León cathedral, principal facade. Documentary photograph, 1998.

Credit: Photograph. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Plate 08

Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche (1497 – c. 1565), notary to the governor. Formal portrait, oil on panel, c. 1530. Provincial workshop.

Credit: Visual reconstruction of the figure.

Plate 09

Isidoro Venegas de Cienfuegos, bishop of León. Official portrait, c. 1748. Colonial Spanish workshop.

Credit: Visual reconstruction of the figure.

Plate 10

Tomasín / Cuauhtli-Tlanextli. Carved stone relief, c. 8 × 8 cm, south transept of the cathedral. Raking-light photograph by C.V.M., 1976.

Credit: Visual reconstruction of the carved relief.

The editor

Plate 11

Consuelo Vargas Montiel (1938 – 2024), architect and editor of this work. León cathedral, south facade. April 1976.

Credit: Visual reconstruction of the figure.

The apparatus — archives and visual references

Plate 12

Casa Lonja de Mercaderes, Seville. Seat of the Archivo General de Indias since 1785.

Credit: Visual reconstruction of the Renaissance building.

Plate 13

The cedar box as it appeared in a corner of León cathedral, April 1976. The editor's magnifying glass and field notebook beside it.

Credit: Visual reconstruction of the moment of discovery.

Colophon

This digital edition of *The Lost Cathedral* gathers, in a single downloadable volume, the editor's preface and the twenty-eight documents that compose the work. The Webmaster's Note and the Webmaster's Epilogue, two liminal texts written for the digital edition of 2026, remain on the website and are not included here.

Layout and code: M.A. Aybar.

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This work is fiction. Read it slowly.

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